# Singing Nature, Dancing Buddha: Zen, Language, and the Groundlessness of Silence

Erik Clarke

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Faculty of Arts, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

## Abstract

This thesis presents Zen experience as aesthetic in nature. This is done through an analysis of language, a central concern for Zen Buddhism. The thesis develops two modes of language at work in Zen: representational and indexical. What these modes of language entail, the kind of relations that are developed through their use, are explored with recourse to a variety of Zen platforms: poetry, the koan, *zazen*, music, and *suizen*. In doing so, a primacy of listening is found in Zen—a listening without a listener. Given this primacy of listening, silence comes to the forefront of the investigation. An analysis of John Cage's 4'33" provides this thesis with justification of the groundlessness of silence, and the groundlessness of subjectivity. Listening allows for the abyssal subject to emerges, which in turn allows for reality to present itself outside of the constitutive function of language.

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## Introduction

This thesis attempts to present Zen experience as aesthetic experience. What we mean by "aesthetic experience", is not tied to the experience of beauty or the sublime, but to the experience of reality proper. This may seem odd from a Western perspective, as we are keen to think that we experience reality proper in all of our daily encounters, and that aesthetics, and aesthetic experience, involves a lifting up to a higher level, or order, of experience. To understand what aesthetic experience is from the Zen perspective, we must first understand what is involved in the experience of reality proper. For Zen, and Japanese culture, nature is reality proper, i.e. natural experience. To say more about the kind of experience aesthetic experience is, we can look at what presents itself in natural experience. When we gaze upon the world with the *dharma*-eye, the impermanence, and mystery of existence presents itself. We experience change, and wonder, at the inner workings of the world. Further, impermanence, and mystery, present themselves as the fundamental conditions of existence. Aesthetic, or natural experience, what Nishida would call "pure experience", is experiencing impermanence, and mystery. For Zen, and Japanese culture, these fundamental conditions of existence are neither negative, nor nihilistic. We must then ask: how is it that these fundamental conditions of experience are lost, or covered up, in our everyday experience.

This will be done through the analysis of language and silence in Zen. Many scholarly works on Zen include a discussion of language, as it is a central theme in Zen Buddhism; however, there is little explicit analysis of the Zen position. A critical analysis of language and its different uses in Zen has not been developed. How does the Zen theory of language relate to fundamental Buddhist doctrines such as impermanence and the doctrine of no-self? If Zen is so critical of language, why do they use it? In answering this question, we identify two *modes* of language in the Zen approach to the linguistic domain. The first, we call "representational", about which Zen holds a negative position in that it perpetuates *samsara* and *samsaric* understanding. The second, we call "indexical", which we will suggest is positive, from the Zen perspective, as it allows for the presentation of suchness (*tathata*), which is how reality is *naturally*. Through the analysis of these two modes of language, we discover that indexical language is primarily an aesthetic medium in which its function is not to explain and enframe, but rather to point directly (index) to the signified, which in the Buddhist context is suchness. Here, the signified speaks for itself, and is not mediated by representation.

In this thesis, we will argue that representational language is synonymous with *avidya*. This is perhaps controversial. In the Buddhist chain of causality, *pratitya samutpada*, there is no analysis of what causes *avidya*. It is considered to be primordial. By suggesting that representational language veils reality, we can speculate why this is the case based on how

this mode of language functions. Based on the critical analysis provided, we make a case for the claim that representational language is *avidya*. Although Early Buddhism would be allergic, or critical of this inquiry, as it is speculative, Zen allows us to cast a critical eye on this issue. In suggesting this, we provide a way to remove *avidya* through a different mode of language that does not veil reality, which we term "indexical".

In indexical language, there is, we argue, an emphasis on listening, which goes beyond merely auditory awareness/cognition. Further, through an analysis of silence, we conclude that silence is something to be listened to, and in light of this, we suggest that there is a primacy of listening in Zen. This is found in Zen practices such as the *koan*, *zazen* mediation, the musical practice of the *shakuhachi*, and the musical meditation called *suizen*. Through listening, not only is *avidya* (ignorance) overcome, but it is also through listening that a non-egological position of subjectivity, what we call the "abyssal subject", arises. To this abyssal subject, the world gives itself in its naturalness, and it experiences the non-dual reality, freed from the confines that language places on it. The abyssal subject sees without a seer, and listens without a listener.

Two assumptions must be made here, otherwise this project does not get off the ground. The first is that Zen, and Buddhism as a whole, is *nirvana*-centric, that is, engaging in Buddhist practice is to be engaged in the eradication of *dukkha*. The second is that Zen's

return to Bodhidharma as the foundational figure, with his dictum "without relying on words and writings"[1], is of vital significance. Consequently, our emphasis on language is an essentially correct appropriation of Zen discourse. Zen assumes that there is a naturalness of existence, one that is creative and spontaneous, and which is veiled, or lost, in the fog of *samsara*. Concepts like "pure experience" allow Zennists and philosophers like Kitaro Nishida to develop an account of the kind of experience which is intended by terms like *satori*. From the Zen perspective, we have seen that the natural is tied to aesthetic experience, which presents the fundamental conditions of existence.

Given what has been said, our project seems to be speculative in approach. To this suggestion, there is no real defence other than it is also critical, even if our conclusions are speculative. Claims are not just being thrown around and accepted. Rather they are thought out, thought through, and given a fair assessment before building on what has been claimed. The argument in this thesis, while being speculative in large part, is still a work of critical philosophy.

This thesis has four chapters. The first chapter, *Language and Reality*, is preliminary in scope. It seeks to demonstrate the relationship between language and experience, and language and our understanding of our experience. Through this discussion, we identify the

[1] Bodhidharma, "The Two Paths" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 10.

two modes of language, the representational and indexical, and their relevance to Zen practice.

The second chapter, *Representational Language: Its Use and Function*, will discuss the first mode. It will show that representational language is a mode of language which privileges permanency and, through this, gives way to a conceptual and "comparative" approach to the world. We suggest that representational language perpetuates *samsara* by constructing reality in its own image, a conceptual "reality". In doing so, we will see how representational language creates the ego, the locus of craving and *dukkha.*

In the third chapter, *Indexical Language: Its Use and Function*, we will show how indexical language is aesthetic in character. Furthermore, indexical language is a mode of language that negates itself. Instead, the function of indexical language is to point straight to the source, unmediated through language. The division between representational and indexical is not between thought, and concepts, versus, feelings, and emotions. Indexical language is *stricto sensu* an index, a pointing. It is not involve in the medium of reference. Further it is neither the case of a distinction between adequate or inadequate correspondence, but the limination inherent in all representation. Indexical language privileges impermanency, hence, the Japanese aesthetic concept of *yugen* (mystery and darkness) plays a primary role. Through the function of pointing, indexical language presents the "groundlessness" of reality,

and the self. The abyssal subject emerges from the use of indexical language and displaces the egological framework.

In the final chapter, *Silence, Sound, and a Return to Nature*, our goal is to show the relationship between indexical language and silence. Through silence, we arrive at what we call the primacy of listening in Zen. It is by listening to the world that the abyssal subject can be attuned with nature, i.e., suchness. By considering John Cage's *4' 33"*, we show that silence is a positive force, and not a mere lack or absence of sound. In so much as silence is interwoven with the sonorous, and given that the "pure" sonorous has no semantic content, our attention will shift toward musical experience as a kind of Zen experience par excellence.

## Chapter 1: Language and Reality

In the study of Zen, we encounter a kind of hostility towards language, philosophical discourse and intellectualization. Zen writings are filled with phrases such as, "The more you think and talk, the more you lose the Way. Cut off all thinking, and pass freely anywhere."[2] In Huang-po's *Transmission of Mind*, we hear, "How can you even hope to approach truth through words?"[3] These statements allow us a glimpse at this hostility, but it is still rather vague and potentially misleading as to what the Zen masters are promoting by cutting off thought. At first glance, it appears that Seng-ts'an is telling us that the Way is lost when we think. But is thinking not what makes us a distinct species and actually allows us to reflect on our condition as human beings? This tension is something D.T. Suzuki, his followers and other commentators hoped to clarify. This seemingly negative stance that appears in the Zen literature led many to consider Zen *amoral*, a reduction of human beings to their natural, animalistic drives, as well as anti-intellectual, that *thought*, broadly understood, was to be removed as it is an impediment to the Way.[4] Suzuki's followers maintained that both these

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[2] Seng-ts'an, "Trust in Mind" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, ed. Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2008), 15.

[3] Huang-po, "Transmission of Mind" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 42.

[4] D.T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 8.

claims have nothing to do with Zen.[5]

The teachings of the historical Buddha that the Zen masters emphasize, as being early shades of Zen, stem from the *Flower Sermon* with its silent teaching.[6] What differentiates the various streams of Buddhism is their *interpretation* of these early works. The shift to Mahayana from Hinayana Buddhism comes about through a disagreement on the role of the *sunyata* (it is not just the self that is empty, but the world or *dharmas* too), the non-duality of nirvana and samsara, and the switch from the *arhat* in favour of the *bodhisattva* (the ethical turn of compassion). It is usually said that the *arhat* is selfishly concerned with attaining enlightenment, while the *bodhisattva* aims to bring enlightenment for all. As the second of the *bodhisattva* vows states, "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them."[7] If this is what splits Mahayana from Hinayana, we can also distinguish what separates Zen from other schools of Mahayana Buddhism. While Zen maintains these fundamental aspects of Mahayana, we can say that Zen places emphasis on the attainment of nirvana, or *satori*, alone. This, at the very least, is the position that D.T. Suzuki takes. Recently, however, scholars have questioned the legitimacy of this statement, claiming that Suzuki negates the entire historical

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[5] This is something that all commentary on Zen grapples with: How to deal with the 'problem' of language. You might go as far to say that Zen is inherently involved in an analysis of language based on placing their roots with Bodhidharma

[6] It is necessary for any stream of Buddhism to trace their lineage to the early sutras and sermons, for otherwise they would be considered something other than Buddhist.

[7] *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), xxxi.

development of Zen with an agenda to prove the superiority of Buddhist eschatology over that of Christianity.[8] The controversy whether or not *satori* is what Zen is in essence will not detain us here. As opposed to providing an 'objective interpretation' of what the truth of Zen is, let us follow along with D.T. Suzuki's analysis. While the criticism against D.T. Suzuki's Orientalism[9] may be justified, the claims regarding a misappropriation of the 'essence' of Zen fail to be coherent with the praxis of Zen and Buddhism as a whole, both of which seem to be *nirvana*-centric. If we say that the 'goal' of Buddhism is *nirvana*, then Suzuki's claim is not only accurate, but suggesting anything else would be a misappropriation of what Buddhism and Zen aim to accomplish.

To be on the Way is to achieve *satori* and to be free from the fetters of *samsara*. To be on the Way is to be in a natural state, in harmony with nature.[10] This turn away from *samsara* requires us to consider how it is that we view, and correspondingly, understand reality. Zen seeks to transform how we relate to the world, which, in essence, is a self-transformation. In other words, Zen seeks to understand how we relate to ourselves. In order to transform how we *relate* to the world, we must first understand the world differently. Zen holds that it is through language we understand reality. Things in the world and our understanding of them

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[8] Bernard Faure, *Chan insights and oversights: an epistemological critique of the Chan tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4.
[9] Ibid; 53.
[10] This is the clear Daoist influence that the school has on Zen and its development.

become meaningful through language. Their meaning and significance is the product of a particular historical language. Usefulness is derived from its meaning which integrates them into day to day practice. The term "historical" emphasizes the temporal element of a particular formation, or structure of reality or contingency and relativity. Things have different meanings, at different times, for different people, and cultures.

As with any philosophical question *about* something, this already presupposes that we know what the something is. What becomes even more problematic is that when we ask "what is language?" we are not only assuming an understanding of what language is, but even more paradoxical is the fact that we are already using language as the medium for the inquiry into this question.[11] This brings us to an even larger question: what is the relationship between language and thought? This question presents itself as the quintessential question of philosophy, which could be more accurately labeled *the philosophical question*, from which arguably, all other philosophical investigation stems. That being said, this thesis will be unable and unequipped to handle such a vast undertaking. We are interested instead in a question derived from *the question*: what is the relationship between language and experience? "If language always seems to presuppose itself, if we cannot assign it a non-linguistic point of departure, it is because language does not operate between something seen

[11] We are going to suggest in the coming pages that with recourse to this fact, language is always working within its own rules determined by its own structure.

(or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying."[12] In so much as language presupposes itself, we arrive at an important observation. Thought and language cannot be separated from one another. Thought is identical with language and language is identical with thought. The two are so tightly enmeshed that they can arguably act as synonyms for one another. Without language, there is no thought, and without thought, there is no language. It is necessary for the development of the argument that this fact should be kept in mind. In saying that language "goes from saying to saying", Deleuze and Guattari are suggesting that the word's meaning is not born from a sense impression, but relationally from word to word. The significance of this is language *mediates* our experience and constructs, as it were, that which we experience. This is what we will later call the *languaging* of experience.

By thus emphasizing the importance of language in our everyday way in the world, the *samsaric* way in the world, Zen returns to the teachings of the *Flower Sermon*. There the Buddha, instead of giving a lecture on the *dharma*, came to the monks and did not speak a word. After some time, he held up a lotus flower and simply smiled. Confused by the absence of a lecture and words, the monks then grappled with what the Buddha was trying to demonstrate through this gesture. One monk, Mahakasyapa, upon observing this,

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[12] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 79.

immediately had a *satori* experience. This is noteworthy as *satori* here occurred without the aid of language. The Buddha did not come forth and say "This is what enlightenment is", and then hold up the flower. There was no enframing of what the discourse was about. There was no narrative or speech for the monks to follow. In the *Flower Sermon*, the understanding of reality occurs independently of language. *Satori* occurs because of a clear-seeing into ones own nature (*kensho*), which simultaneously discloses suchness (*tathata*) or reality. At the extinguishing of false views tied to *samsaric* living, the historically inherited world that we inherit and find ourselves thrown into, loosens its hold on us. That is, *satori* gives birth to our natural way in the world which is quite distinct from various contingent, cultural, and historical manifestations.

In the *Flower Sermon*, we find a silent transmission of the *dharma*, which is a non-discursive, direct communication from teacher to student. There was a direct transmission from mind to mind, as the Masters like to call it, without the use of language. The 'lecture' was without words and yet Mahakasyapa and the Buddha communicated. This suggests to us that a different kind of exchange was going on between the Master and student. Communication occurred without reference to the communicative function of language. The *Flower Sermon* is considered the foundational sutra for Zen as it demonstrates

Bodhidharma's dictum "*without relying on words and writings*"[13]. A return to our "original nature", or "your face before your parents were born" as it is sometimes called, marks a turning away from a "conceptual" understanding of reality, as this is always *samsaric*, bound to historical, contingent understanding, towards a way in the world that gives us access to experience untainted by *samsaric* baggage.[14] A conceptual understanding is always a linguistic understanding, and as will be shown, language necessarily distorts reality. For Zen, the purity of reality, the natural way of things, is pre-linguistic. The reason for suggesting that the Zen way is pre-linguistic, and not non-linguistic, is that if it were non-linguistic, we would not be able to speak *about* it at all. Further, we would not be able to entertain any thoughts regarding it. By maintaining that is it pre-linguistic, we can still speak about it, though the account of it will not accurately present Zen experience itself.

According to the Zen masters, the historicity of language, or how words come to expand and shrink in scope, is something that is not given adequate attention in our everyday lives. Commonly, we take the word (signifier) to be a constant demarcation of the object (signified) and its essence. This leads us to the belief that the word has always meant the same thing. We are born into a system of signification, a system of pre-established relations between

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[13] Bodhidharma, "The Two Paths" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 10.

[14] This will later be referred to as "pure experience". It is pure as there is no addition to the raw sense datum.

signifiers and signifieds, the actual path that the word and its meaning has had to take to get to where it is in this "now" remains concealed from us. The problem then lies in the fact that if we understand reality only through language and what language signifies changes, then how do we really experience reality? Do we really experience the object signified? Are we only experiencing what language has mediated and represented and the internal relations of language? Words have their own historicity and so does the way we process reality. One must look no further than the history of philosophy or linguistics to grasp these epochs in thinking. Each historical period, each linguistic period conceives and constructs reality in its own way. The world is constructed through the internal relations of the language.

The advent of philosophy with Socrates was to use reason to find the way reality truly is, as a means for guiding normative thinking. In the epoch of medieval philosophy, the most significant project was to prove the existence of God, and to determine moral prescriptions from that proof. With the Enlightenment, the project shifted away from the primacy of ethics to the primacy of knowledge: what can we know about the nature of our existence with certainty and how can we use this knowledge to 'enrich' the world? As the 'post-modern' epoch started the refutation of Truth took the forefront. As Nietzsche wrote, what "the philosopher says about man, however, is at bottom no more than a testimony about the man

of a very limited period."[15] The relationship between our thinking about our condition is always limited to 'historical sense'. The point being made is that the very meaning of experience changes. That is, the direction of language, the space that it occupies, gives a specific meaning to experience and allows for the creation of values. This is very much the argument for cultural relativism. My point however is not to argue for cultural relativism, but to understand on what claims this relativism is grounded. *We are interested in showing how language is the determining element of experience*. We can present the argument as follows:

1. Our experience is determined by what can be thought.
2. What can be thought is tied to what a language can and cannot say.

Therefore: language is the primary determining element in experience.

Even though there is this scepticism towards language and discourse, the Zen masters themselves wrote a great deal. They wrote commentaries on the sutras, recorded anecdotes, journals dictating their experience, and poetry. This hostility we should note, is to the *samsaric* quality that our everyday language has and how it translates into our understanding of the world. Language divides and subdivides, forming categories and objects, which shape our understanding of reality. The Zen masters maintain that these divisions bind us to a specific way of viewing the world. They claim that though language is understood as a means,

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[15] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 13.

a medium through which we communicate, it also shapes and dictates the way we experience the world and understand this experience. When we sense something, it is conceptualized and the conceptualization of experience is the *languaging* of experience. The descriptions and classification of sensations are conceptual markers for what stands in as the sense datum. When we sense the object at hand, all of the sense qualities become categorized in a split second. Accompanying every sense perception is the conceptual apparatus to tell us what that sensation is and what it *means*. There is always a linguistic framework, a scaffolding on experience that constitutes it. It is in this manner that we suggest that it is what is within the confines of the language that shapes our experience and not, as some would argue, the other way around. However, as we have begun to point out, the different space that language occupies yields different limitations.

Let us admit there can be no differentiation and no relation between things without language, but Zen maintains that without language we do not end up in a nihilistic vacuum. The question of meaning and meaninglessness does not play a role in our natural state.[16] One can reflect on music where no words are uttered, but the sounds themselves can still do something to us. There is no semantic or representational content in many kinds music, but the sounds can make us *feel* a certain way. They can produce kinds of experiential relations.

[16] Though it is not the purpose of this thesis, we would suggest that the problem of nihilism is not a problem from the Zen perspective as the question of meaning is already to entrenched in language.

That is, the sounds can affect our mood *without* recourse to concepts. While one can maintain that music has its own language, in the sense of rhythmic and harmonic laws, when listening to it, we are not translating the raw sound-data into a linguistic framework, there is nothing like a speech act that is being constructed in us. Of course, a musician could listen to a piece and transcribe it while listening to it, but this does not have to be the case. If someone were to ask you "what are you doing right now?", before the utterance could make sense, you would have translated each bit of sound to the corresponding word. Only after the sound data was translated into words could you understand the question that was being asked of you. However, when listening to music, specifically instrumental music or music in a foreign language (where the semantic content cannot be translated), certain emotions, even a sense of clarity or dread, can be arrived at without being ensnared in the web of semantics. The mood that is evoked from the experience can produce a kind of way in the world. Arguably, without a representational understanding, there is only be a holistic unfolding of events as they are in themselves. This is what the Zen masters attempt to demonstrate. This suggests that there is a different *kind* of 'logic' at work in Zen, a logic not bound to formal logic.

William Burroughs writes, "language is a virus from outer space"[17], infecting and

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[17] William S. Burroughs, *Dead City Radio*. Fontana Island CD B000001FYF.

destroying us from the inside. A virus is like a pattern that duplicates to all cells cutting off rejuvenation. It attaches itself to the cell and for everything that has come in contact with it falls under its code, its orders and ordering. Language has rules which must be observed and that cannot be broken. What is associated with words—these associations form our understanding of the world—dictate the world we experience. Language, the virus, infects and transports us away from reality into the infected world of words and their associations. You do not get embarrassed from sense impressions alone; you feel embarrassed from the language that is said to describe the sense impressions and the scenario the sense perceptions find themselves in. The associations of language—the ordering of experience and the order-word—push us in a certain direction. Language makes us understand the perceptual field in a particular manner. Original experience is like a body that has removed the virus from its system or has been given the cure. The infection, now that is has been removed, no longer holds sway over the body. *Languaged* experience disappears and pure experience is possible only when the virus has been removed.

There is definitely a positive use for language, or for a mode of language. There are different ways to use language. For example, take a textbook on the history of *haiku* and the *haiku* themselves. When we read a textbook, the language is saying everything. That is, it gives an account of the topic at hand. There is always a topic, a theme, a subject matter or an

object of its discussion. In the account of the history of *haiku*, information is given with recourse to the *haiku* themselves, historical documentation and the like, describing elements of the historical *haiku*: themes for a period, tone, and tempo. The textbook might describe the themes that Santoka (1882-1940) frequently uses, or his location while writing a specific *haiku*. The textbook might even attempt, to present a reason for writing a certain piece or for the words chosen based on a psychological or biographical discussion. *Haiku*, however, do not speak of anything aloud. They silently speak around the language they use. They put forth no claim or justification. In fact, the words they use, its language, is only secondary to evoking what *haiku* is pointing to. We can say that language is dynamic and can take on a variety of different roles and purposes: language has different modes. These many modes of language are conducive to particular ends. There is the mode found commonly in the sciences which functions on the axis of truth in an attempt to describe how reality is objectively. This is the mode of representational language. There is the mode of language found in poetry which functions on the axis of perspective, from the first-person perspective. This is the mode we will call the indexical. In the following chapter, we will be discussing the indexical at length. Each mode brings with it a particular ontology and epistemology: what kind of beings there are (ontology) and how we know them (epistemic justification). Inherently, a problem presents itself as one mode holds claims to objective truth while the other stands on the side

of subjectivity. From the position of one, the other is delegitimized as mere myth—that which can provide no rational justification. From the other side, the drive for truth is a building of limitations on reality. These ideas will be explored in what follows, but, for now, let us hold onto the idea that different modes of language, the space in which language occupies, produce different worlds and different relations.

Language is the medium in which the Zen masters present their criticisms, and while these could be considered teachings, these words and letters do not contain within them the "spirit of Zen" that the student is trying to embody. The question then is: How do the Zen masters get out of this apparent circle? They are saying that language binds us to *samsaric* living, but this claim itself uses the very thing that ties us to *samsara.* The limitations are exposed through that which generates and sustains them. What is the Zen view about language? Does the charge of anti-intellectualism hold weight? It is clear that they do not consider our current, everyday language use fruitful for the task of achieving *satori* and overcoming *dukkha.* The Zen masters have a negative view of this form of language. The Master is not trying to impart knowledge to the student through a set of doctrines and moral codes, but rather he tries to get them to experience for themselves, on their own individual terms, their original nature and the *sunyata* of all things. Language can only help in its ability to point us back to our original nature.

Zen proposes that it is through words, letters, and teachings that we become bound and unable to experience reality. Experience is forced *into* our concepts, or our concepts are forced *onto* our experience. Our concepts limit the possible ways we can experience. Changing our concepts and their relations inherently means changing how and what we experience. A different categorical schema means a different understanding of the world, but, at the same time, a new limit would emerge at the end of the new linguistic apparatus. Through this particular mode of language, we are unable to move beyond the paradox it has created, we can only experience what language has delineated. In a sense, experience has become *languaged*, and by this account attached to *samsaric* living. This use of language has permeated our understanding and our experience of the world.

> Zen in its essence is the *art* of seeing into the nature of one's own being, and it *points* the way from bondage to freedom. By making us drink right from the fountain of life, it liberates us from all the yokes under which we finite beings are usually suffering in this world. We can say that Zen liberates all the energies properly and naturally stored in each of us, which are in ordinary circumstances cramped and distorted so that they find no adequate channel for activity.[18]

This introductory paragraph of *Essays in Zen Buddhism I* is an encapsulation of what Zen aims to do, viz., free us from self-alienation, giving our creative capacity an "adequate channel" for expression. Zen seeks to be naturally at home in the world. This adequate channel is needed for access to that, where language cannot touch and where it cannot go. In this passage, the goal and its fruits are laid out, but the process by which to engage this

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[18] D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 13. Italics my own.

transformation, and why we end up with a false view of reality, have not yet been understood. By not relying on teachings and words, the Zen masters emphasize the personal and experiential element, the existential turn, that will allow students to see for themselves the way out of *samsara*. The purely theoretical side of the nature of our condition is bracketed in order to get at what is important for our practical lives. As Nishitani remarks, the theoretical "dissolves the being of individual things."[19] We are interested in organizing elements of experience to provide ease in our daily life, but at the cost of reducing the singularity of individual entities into classes of things. Nishitani argues that, with the dissolving of singularity comes alienation from within, which is self-alienation. Even ourselves as the experiencers become nothing more than a class of things: human. The element of self-alienation suggests that we are cutting something off from our own existence and, as such, we have lost our naturalness; we have become alien.

The Zen masters tell us that knowing how or why we suffer intellectually is unimportant.[20] What matters for Zen is the practical issue: how to overcome *samsara*. This existential focus is indicative of the Zen position that nothing is worth more, or of a higher value, than our immediate personal engagement with the world as we live it, our own confrontation with our existence. We alone have to navigate ourselves through the world. There is nothing that

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[19] Keiji Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert Carter (New York: State University Press of New York, 2006), 98.

[20] This is present in Hinayana Buddhism as well with regards to the arrow analogy.

teachings and moral prescriptions can do if there has not been an experiential moment for the individual. This is what is meant by D.T. Suzuki when he says Zen abandons the whole doctrinal foundations of Buddhism by focusing on *satori* alone. He comments, "No meaning is to be sought in the expression itself, but within ourselves, in our own minds, which are awakened to the same experience. Therefore when we understand the language of the Zen masters, it is the understanding of ourselves and not the sense of the language which reflects ideas and not the experienced feelings themselves."[21] *Samsaric* language is but one kind of comportment towards reality, one that brings about self-alienation. This mode of language has reduced us to the level of mere things. The dissolving of singularity into abstractions, and the creation of seemingly permanent things, comes forth through representational language. We can go as far to say that the mode of representational language is the mode of self-alienation. Representational language is always an account *of* nature that has always already been bifurcated into subject-object. In other words, the starting point is from the Self, and the Self is the cause of suffering for the Buddhists. *Samsaric* language is tied to the position that "self" takes towards reality, bound to the structure of the particular language and its grammatical rules. In Zen commentary, we begin to see the soteriological emphasis over concerns about knowledge and truth. The purpose has shifted, or was never there from the

[21] Suzuki; 290.

start for Zen; the space that language occupies in Zen practice is for removing *dukkha*. We cannot arrive at this through dialectic, but we immediately feel it stirring from within, a need to be at home, to be on the Way, to be natural.

The Zen master is still engaged in representational language when he is writing commentaries on the sutras. However, the Zen use of representational languages is negative, in that it uses the logic of representation against itself. They show that representational understanding and language limit our experiential field by classifying experience into arbitrary distinctions. This classification removes the phenomenon's uniqueness, and based on its classification, places us under the illusion that these distinctions represent a move towards truth. Furthermore, it is by knowing the truth we will not suffer. One of the functions of representation is to arrive at the scientific depiction of reality. This movement is built into the logic of representation. It would be another type of thinking if it did not attempt to quantify reality. However, representational language pushes us away from the concern with our own existence into what Heidegger calls 'the they'.[22] Representational language produces *samsara*. This concern for our own life being abandoned is a stepping stone to our self-alienation. Yet, this representational mode is needed for survival. The function of ascribing permanency and abstraction was a survival tactic. They helped to guard against the

[22] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1962), 165.

dangers that nature can bring at a moment's notice. However, this organization of reality is not for the flourishing of human beings as Nishitani argued. Reality is more than what representation can present.[23] This is only one way in which reality has been constituted. It has been said that what distinguishes us from other animals is our use of a highly elaborate linguistic structure—that we are linguistic beings. Additionally, it tells us that we are communal beings, as language is a communicative tool. For human beings, communal living was necessary for survival as a species. What this suggests is that we need language to live. However, representational language is one-dimensional, cutting off something that is essential to us, and covering up its source to make it seem as if this were the only way reality could appear.

In Zen practice, language is viewed as functioning indexically, where the words are not representing things, but are calling the listener to turn inwardly, to their "original nature" and experience for themselves, what the language is pointing to. This direct pointing is to our original way in the world, the plane from which all formations of reality stem, which escapes language altogether: it is the outside of language. This plane from which all formations of reality are born is *sunyata. Sunyata*, constituted in different ways, with different categories and classifications, gives the world differently. However, at the same time, the contingent

[23] This could be called the staring point for Buddhism as a whole. If you do not admit to *dukkha* then the project does not get off the ground.

world-views are from *sunyata* and, in this sense, are from the same "source". It is in this sense of going outside of the language, that we can say that the Zen use of indexical language is a work of "skillful means", because what is experienced through indexical language is not contained within the words uttered or on some understanding of doctrines and properties of things, but rather with what is experienced itself. It is what language is unable to grasp. Indexical language points to and allows us to experience the *sunyata* of reality. This is what the *Heart Sutra* seeks to demonstrate in saying "form is emptiness and emptiness is form"[24].

[24] "The Heart Surta" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 4.

## Chapter 2: Representational Language: Use and Function

There is a Buddhist parable in Mishima's *Spring Snow* about a monk on a pilgrimage who stops to rest in a graveyard when night falls. Thirst awakened the monk from his slumber, and while unable to see in the darkness, he was able to locate a small puddle that contained water from a recent rainfall. After he drank this, the monk remarked that the water was the purest water he had ever tasted. He returned to sleep. When he awoke in the morning, the monk was excited to see the glorious puddle that had given him this delightful experience during the night. But, the monk found no puddle, only a skull that had accumulated rain water. The monk was disgusted by this turn in his understanding and began to vomit.[25] This parable tells us that, apart from the 'history' of the water, it was the purest water one could imagine. Primarily, only thirst, water, and a place were present. There was no concern of the past or for the future, only the immediate occurrence was present to give meaning. There was only a *being-in* of the experience. There was no 'world', a totality of things present, only a place in which events unfold. However, as a background or a narrative about the water began to form and memory entered, a world developed. The role of memory is that it holds previous beliefs and associations. There is retention of the world and its linguistic demarcation shapes future

[25] Yukio Mishima, *Spring Snow*, trans. Alfred A. Knopf Inc. (New York: Gulf and Western Corporation, 1972), 27 – 28.

experience. Memory serves as the ground for the belief in permanency and consistency. The water and what it signified became re-presented through understanding. This resulted in the water's "purity" becoming "revolting". The water was judged to be revolting after the original encounter with it. That is to say, the water was represented through a conceptual framework that language formed. Two options present themselves: it was either that the water itself was revolting or it was what was predicated of the water by the language used which made the water revolting. As the story unfolds, it highlights that it was the predication of qualities to the water that made the monk sick. It was what the water *became* through the understanding, and the language used to understand it, that made it what it was. The original encounter saw the water as the purest water to have ever been drunk. This original encounter turned into disgust through the addition of further 'information', *post-facto* to the original experience. That is, the plane in which events unfolded was constituted in a particular manner. By further analyzing this scenario, it will help us unlock the kind of engagement with the world that the Zen masters are arguing against and also how deeply ingrained representational language is in our understanding of the world.

To emphasize this relationship between our use of language and our understanding of the world, we turn to Alan Watts, a student of D.T. Suzuki and Zen teacher. Understanding is the processing of experience. While it is easy for us to see how the designation of a word to an

object is arbitrary or a matter of convention, saying calling a drum a drum as opposed to a book, it is difficult to see how the processing of experience is also a matter of convention. Consider the world of a child.

> His culture has tacitly agreed to divide things from each other, to mark out the boundaries within our daily experience. Thus scientific convention decides whether an eel shall be a fish or a snake, and grammatical convention determines what experiences shall be called objects and what shall be called events or actions. How arbitrary such conventions may be can be seen from the question "what happens to my fist [noun-object] when I open my hand?" the object miraculously vanishes because an action was disguised by a part of speech usually assigned to a thing![26]

The example of a child is most fitting to show how the use of language dictates and forms the way we understand and process experience. That is to say, how we engage the world is dependent upon how we understand the world, and this understanding of the world is constructed through linguistic and conceptual distinctions. Again, we return to our initial position that thinking and language are so tightly intertwined that we cannot separate one from the other. The point here is not to suggest epistemological relativism, which is a default position, but rather to emphasize how interdependent our inner states and our understanding are with our claims about reality. Viewing a drum as an object for striking to produce sound will designate a specific function and use for that drum. This can even be extended to suggest that our geographical location, factors like climate, will influence how we understand and relate to the world. Our understanding of the world is based upon the language we use to

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[26] Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 5.

describe it. The distinctions and delineations that language has made about the world are, as the Zen masters claim, just a matter of "convention". They could have been delineated in another manner that would then result in an entirely different way of engaging the world: signifiers are contingent. The plane of *sunyata* could have been conceptualized, layered and veiled with concepts, in entirely another manner. This can be further emphasized through different cultural and linguistic understandings of what the word 'soul' delineates. In the Christian tradition, the word "soul" carries a particular meaning. The soul is understood as the eternal life-giving entity that will carry on to Heaven or Hell. The word "soul", is an extreme example of how our understanding/linguistic designation shapes how we engage and live in the world. We cannot ostensibly point to the soul, as it is not a material object. The 'soul' has only become an object through a linguistic naming and the circulation and perpetuation of this name occurs through our religious discourse. This shows us the reifying powers of names. Our understanding of the world and how to engage it was a result of what this word designated. A system of ethics was developed based on the analytic of the linguistic term and what became predicated to it. There is reward for the good and punishment for the wicked. A code of conduct concerning how to live was derived from the understanding of this linguistic term. In a culture that lacks this word and hence concept, its ethical principles would develop very differently. We could suggest from here that, it is not the object of

experience that is meaningful for a culture, but what the word is said to represent. However, we cannot forget that our primordial experience as human beings is inherently the same. Our senses work in the same manner. The way the eye reflects light, the way the ear translates vibrations; these are primordial ways in which we, as human beings, engage the world. Language is what distinguishes and places values on different experiential phenomena. Language is culture; not language as different phonetic speech systems, but language as the system of relations between signifiers, or culture, broadly understood, is an effect of a given mode of language. This is why *satori* is considered equal or "equalized experience"[27], as it allows for contingent formations of reality to break open, allowing for our "original nature" to show itself.

Embedded in the use of language is the idea that the words, however arbitrarily decided, truly *represent* the world of experience. We can say that representation is the mirror model of experience and sense perception. The mind functions as a mirror accurately capturing the experience. The problem for such a model is that the understandings of sense impressions are comprehended through language and that the objects of experience do not carry within them their 'essence' in language, as de Saussure has shown.[28] When we say representation, or

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[27] Steve Heine, *Dogen and the Koan Tradition: Two Tales of the Shobogenzo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 51.

[28] Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 68-69.

representational understanding, we mean that the experience is being re-*presented* through a conceptual framework that the language and grammatical structure of the language have delineated. If the experience is being represented, this entails that it is being represented to someone. That is, representational understanding is necessarily dualistic in that it distinguishes between the object being experienced and the subject in whom these things are experienced. Experience becomes bifurcated, *post-facto*, into a world of subjects that encounter objects in the world. Hui-neng (638-713) in the *Platform Sutra* saw the problem with the mirror model when reflecting on the stanza of the head instructor. The instructor wrote, "mind is like a standing mirror, always try to keep it clean, don't let it gather dust."[29] Hui-neng replied with his own stanza, "the mirror doesn't have a stand, our Buddha-nature is forever pure, where do you get this dust"[30] The point that Hui-neng is making is that the mirror does not reflect sense impressions directly from the world. For that reason, the mirror does not stand, the analogy between mirror and mind or thought is inaccurate. The mind, or thought, is what bifurcates experience with recourse to the language it uses to understand its experience. What is reflected in the 'mirror' has already been through the conceptual framework of language.

Representational language seeks to capture the object of experience and bring it to full-

[29] Hui-Neng, *The Platform Sutra*, trans. Red Pine (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 6.
[30] Ibid; 8.

presence. That is, qualities become predicated to the object of experience. Through this, the object is given a distinct area that it occupies and it is confined to this space. Since representational language deals in permanency and in abstractions, claims made about experience can be weighed against each other. 'Rational' analysis can be developed and formal rules of thought can be derived only by making experience into a permanent unchanging reality. Laws can be created only from conceptualized experience. Objects have been delineated through their predicates and thus revealed in their entirety, or so the logic of representation would like us to think.

What is predicated of the object is represented to the understanding as the whole of the object. A careful description is given of the object of experience, and, through this method, we can come to know all of what is shown from the object. In the object's creation at the hands of the Self, it has been accounted for in its whole. Nothing has escaped, or whatever has escaped the constitutive grasp is unknown and unknowable. The object of experience has been made intelligible through the confining application of representational linguistic laws, such as the rules of formal logic. The differentiation of experience through language becomes the subjective point of departure. The simplest form of differentiation would be 'this' and 'that', or 'me' and 'not-me'. Qualities, classes, and categories—developed through the observation of similarities and differences—become predicated to the objects of experience

through the representational use of language. This is the product of representational thinking's attempt to map out and give a full account of the nature of our condition. It is through this that language is taken to be the truth of reality. If we look back at Mishima's parable, we can see this taking place through the retrospective understanding of the monk's awareness of what he did. He saw the decaying skull with water that he had drunk, and, based on the categorization and predication of decaying with death and disgusting, the monk retroactively became sick. Prior to this representation of experience, when he was just in the experience itself, the water was beautiful because the conceptual framework could not have been applied due to the circumstances of sensory deprivation. The water was nourishing to the parched monk. Only the primordial experience was present. The lack of illumination, the darkness of the night prevented a linguistic and representational framework from being applied to the experience. This lack of illumination, the inability of perception—the eye in this case, was unavailable for the understanding's conceptual grid to be placed on experience. 'Things' were not given in their entirety; there was a certain mystery that occurred in the plane that broke the monk's everyday understanding. This element of mystery simply refers to the unknown, that which has not been subjected to language's constitutive power. We can suggest in light of this that primordial or pure experience is what the Zen enterprise suggests is free from the binds of *samsara*. The constructive element that language has in describing

experience was absent, and with that its rules for description were surpassed. The understanding of what the skull 'is' as predicated in language was absent: there was no skull. There was only the occurrence as it unfolded, which is said to be indicative of our Buddha-nature.

The objects of experience transform into permanent entities through their linguistic designation. Language seeks to freeze the object, to enclose it, so that it remains the same each time this thing is experienced. Thomas Kasulis writes, "Thinking includes most of what we typically regard as consciousness—that is, any mental activity whereby we explicitly or implicitly take a stance toward some object, whether that stance be emotional, judgmental, believing, remembering, or assumptive."[31] When we think, we are taking a positional attitude. It is positional in that thinking works relationally between an object and the stance which the subject takes towards it, such as a judgment of what the object 'is'. It is through thinking, with its recourse to linguistic designation and the rules of formal logic, that the object of experience becomes encased, they become *languaged.* This is so because representational language cannot point towards other possible relations with the world or in the world. It claims to give a full account of everything. It has forgotten itself; it has forgotten about that which allows for the representational enterprise to be undertaken. Everything

[31] T.P. Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 73-74.

becomes an object and caught in this net; the subject becomes reduced to an object. The problem arises not when we attach words to experience to describe it, but when we take the words, and their conceptual framework, to hold the meaning as opposed to the experience of what the word signifies. It is through this use of language that we are tricked into thinking about truth and the objective standpoint. This is just a necessary feature of the representational language's conceptual constructions of the plane of *sunyata*; it obscures its flow.

If objects are permanent, then there is a certain way in which objects are. They are permanent, continuous, and have the ability to be formulated as laws. The representational account then gets tied to the primacy of knowledge, thereby producing disengagement with the world. Investigation takes precedence over the existential element. A spectator of experience is brought in who sends us away from our own experience of reality towards what language has designated it to be. While it is an individual experience in the sense that the reactions to the perceptions are a product of a single historical agent, what these things are is dictated through language. When you see a maple tree, you call it a maple tree, but what of this maple is like the other maple trees you have seen? Does not language function in a way that saturates the experience of that specific maple tree? "We may have a lingering sense of having compromised part of our experience [by naming it], but we continue to devise new

categories, new names for new things, more distinctions when a moment before there were no distinctions."[32] However, language cannot capture the immediate feeling one has. It can produce a report about the feeling. In fact, the Zen masters claim that language is insufficient for describing experience as it unfolds. There is always a gap between what is felt in experience and what is communicated. As we have suggested, this domination of language, by substituting itself for what is real, has cost us access to experience itself. Pure experience has been lost and substituted for a *languaged* experience. It has cost us our own experience. "Science has a position that is in a sense, aloof from human beings, for it submits things to objective reflection by taking a perspective transcendent to human feeling and desire, and tries to know the laws that preside over things."[33] Science and the scientific approach aim at this dehumanized way of engaging the world. Science would claim that human affairs are full of emotions, and erroneous claims about the world. For the goal of prediction the human element is only a hindrance. Any part that works against the drive for prediction, is to be marginalized; it is of no use and only detrimental to 'objectivity'. What is missed in the scientific approach of representation is the very human element in which we are submerged. As Heidegger states, "Being is an issue"[34] for us, a essential point that scientific inquiry

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[32] Ibid; 55.
[33] Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert Carter (New York: State University Press of New York, 2006), 97-98
[34] Heidegger; 32.

misses. It has severed our ties with our original nature; representation has alienated us from ourselves. The richness and beauty of every individual moment decays, thrown into the *samsaric* ways of the world, keeping us blinded to the emptiness of all *things*. Kasulis demonstrates this saturation of experience at the hands of language, when he discusses his first encounter with a philodendron.

> The uniqueness of each of our experiences of the same philodendron (as we walk around it or water it through the years) is pushed into the background. The word philodendron becomes a filter on our experience, a filter blurring the outlines of each member of the class philodendron so that we can focus on the class as a whole....[This] distorts the original image. Feeling an occasional sense of loss, we might try to compensate for it by expressing the inadequacy we feel. One might say "Yes, but I also know that every philodendron is unique; each is one, in some discernible way, different from all the rest." Yet if one is fully honest with oneself, one recognizes something hollow in this attempt. If the word philodendron no longer rings true, can the words *unique* or *different* be any truer?[35]

Even in our attempts to recount this experience to ourselves or others, the uniqueness is doomed to failure, because representational language is always abstracting to the larger class to which the object belongs, away from the singularity of the particular. The point Kasulis makes about qualifying the statement shows us, how deeply removed language is from original experience. Language saturates experience by placing any experience into a linguistic expression that is said to adequately represent what is experienced. This is the error of the mirror model. However, by reflecting on this process we can see how language does not function the same way that experience does. To say that one is feeling joy is not the same

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[35] Kasulis; 55-56.

as actually feeling joyous; the feeling or experience is not something that can be adequately captured in a word or a series of words. There is always a gap between what I feel and what language says and can say. The immediate feeling (that can have no name for it is not a thing) is the experience of *sunyata*. When language pushes us into the abstract, can my experience be said to be truly my own? Is any expression adequate for what I am feeling and the immediacy of feeling? The saturation of experience by language has moved us away from experiencing the world for ourselves into a *languaged* experience. It is the "prison house of language". Further, there ceases to be a personal experience, as it is moved into the experience of the same. Representational language clutches and grasps at experience in an attempt to make sense of its world, to organize, to structure it, but always at the expense of moving the experiencer further and further away from the experience itself. To combat this, another mode of language which can help us regain our "original nature" is needed.

In representational language and understanding, there is a certain frame for how we can think: this is built into its logic. It is so deep-seated that one finds difficulty in even comprehending the possibility that there could be any other way. In fact, it would be impossible for representational language and thinking to see an alternative because the first step is puncturing syllogistic reasoning. Thinking and representation cannot function in this way. A is A and A is not-A is a logical impossibility for representation. This is exactly why

this framework cannot think outside of the syllogism because an object either is that or it is not. Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world"[36]. What is of interest here is not the emphasis Wittgenstein places on the subjective side—that *my* world is limited to the language at my disposal, but that language, and what it can say, is the totality *of* the 'world'. What language can say is the totality of *what* is. However, the "what is" must be able to be referred to, that is, it must be able to be reproduced if there is going to be a truth claim made about it. In order for the truth of reality to make sense, there must be a way in which it can be measured. This reinforces our claim that the world is experienced through language, and because of language's function to enclose phenomenon of experience, language inherently distorts reality. Wittgenstein, and the Analytic tradition, attempt to develop a science of consciousness. They develop a system of continuity under which all objects of experience are subjected. After the science of experienced phenomenon was developed, there would be an analysis into the claims made about the world, based on the way in which experience must be represented. However, the contingency of the categories, as aesthetic experience shows, presents the problem that our experience of the world conforms to what the language can say, that we experience language and its relations over and above the world. Wittgenstein's claim remains consistent within the

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[36] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pearson and B.F. McGuiness (New York: Rutledge Classics, 2001), 68.

framework of representational language; but this mode is not the only mode of experience. The more accurate statement would read, "the limits of representation are the limits of the represented world", in as much as language is the instrument through which reality is constructed.

The object in 'full presence' cannot admit anything else, certainly not its opposite for if it could, this would suggest that A has not been entirely understood, that it is perhaps otherwise. Even in this dialectic, A would cease being A and become not-A. However, it can never admit both. Propositional truth can only be A. However, the Zen masters will suggest that it is these strict rules of representational language that block our natural creative impulses and bind us to *samsara*. The creative impulse we have as a feature of our "buddha-nature" is being confined.

> We are too much of a slave to the conventional way of thinking, which is dualistic through and through. No 'interpretation' is allowed, there takes place no fusing of opposites in our everyday logic.... Black in not white, and white is not black. Tiger is tiger, and cat is cat, and they will never be one. Water flows, a mountain towers. That is the way things, or *ideas* go in this universe of the senses and syllogisms.[37]

We think by means of language, but we have forgotten or cannot think what language is based on and how language fails to catch what it is signifying. In our "natural state", we do not experience the world in language; the linguistic account is always retrospective, after the fact. The monk and the skull attest to this. It is for this reason that the Zen masters are harsh

[37] D.T Suzuki, *Essays*, 269. Italics my own.

towards language because our natural potential does not lie in the use of language as truth-tool or what language can describe about the experience, but rather with what is itself experienced and our personal relationship with these experiences. Pure experience, unadulterated, is pre-linguistic, and, forgetting this, we become bound to the words that re-present experience with its internal logic of what can and cannot be. In this mode, there is no way out for one seeking to recover one's original nature. This is why *satori*, i.e., acquiring a 'new' viewpoint,[38] is needed to overcome *dukkha*. Experience does not always have to be about the relation of ideas which re-present experience through a conceptual framework; it can be experiential in the sense of describing feelings about experience or it can function indexically where what is said is only a key to unlocking an experiential element to which the language is pointing. Indexical language functions practically, with its emphasis on the experience of reality, while representational language functions intellectually with the primacy of knowledge and pursuit of truth. The existential emphasis, the Zen masters claim, cannot be accomplished within the confines of thinking and representational language. As Watts remarks, "so long as the conscious intellect is frantically trying to clutch the world in its net of abstractions, and to insist that life be bound and fitted into its rigid categories, the mood of Taoism will remain incomprehensible; and the intellect will wear itself out."[39] In

[38] Ibid; 229.
[39] Watts, 19.

other words, if the egological position is taken towards experience, which must always delineate and abstract, we will never be attuned to the way we naturally are in the world. To be attuned is to be able to experience without the conceptual grid that language has developed and which has seeped through to the entirety of our experience. Attunement resides in the shedding of representation, in acquiring a new viewpoint.

So much has been said about the *samsaric* character of representational language, but what about the Zen masters' use of language? Their critiques also seem to be working positionally and also dealing with conceptual abstractions. When the Zen masters say that language is the means by which we become bound to a particular mode of experience, they are indeed making judgments and delineating what words mean what, resulting in a bifurcated understanding of experience. There is a role that representational language plays. It functions to stabilize, or attempt to stabilize, into a group understanding, making it so that we can plan for the future. There is a need for this type of understanding. It would be foolish to call for its abandonment entirely. To help us understand this Zen use of language, we will turn again to Kasulis, who distinguishes between the thinking of representation and critique, which he calls "not-thinking". [40] "Not-thinking, in its intentional or *act* aspect, is like certain forms of thinking in that it takes a negating, denying, or rejecting attitude....the object of not-

[40] Mu-shin

thinking's intentionality is thinking itself."[41] What Kasulis is suggesting is that, while not-thinking is positional (in that it takes a stance toward something), its position is towards thinking. Not-thinking seeks to negate thinking and its formulations, or from our reading, this negative use of representational language seeks to negate representational language and understanding itself by showing its limitations and embedded assumptions. This negative use is the work of critique. It is through critique that the Zen masters are able to show that is it possible to experience reality in a different manner that is not tied to representation. Not-thinking is, however, still egological in that its position is towards thinking. In a sense, we are still in the realm of the theoretical as the existential element is still absent. It is only by stepping outside of this positionality that *satori* can occur. *Sunyata* escapes, evades, and overflows all representational accounts. Through negation, we are able to see how it could be possible to have an experience without the conceptual framework, for it is from this plane that intellectualization originated in the first place. It is not that "experience exists because there is an individual", but that "an individual exists because there is experience."[42] In the first instance, it appears that the construction of the world is from the first-person perspective and while that is half true, the created world corresponds to its linguistic formulation. There is still a more fundamental sphere which gives the possibility of that experience in which that

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[41] Kasulis, 74.

[42] Masao Abe, introduction to *Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)

individual exists, and his created experience, because there is an experiential field indiscriminated by language. The "pure experience is the intuition of facts just as they are and that it is devoid of meaning."[43] Following Nishida, Kasulis calls this without-thinking. It is from the raw sense datum of without-thinking that thinking and representation are able to take shape. Without-thinking "is distinct from thinking and not-thinking precisely in its assuming no intentional attitude whatsoever: it neither affirms nor denies, accepts nor rejects, believes nor disbelieves. In fact, it does not objectify either implicitly or explicitly."[44] It would be in the state of without-thinking that all of our creative impulses and spontaneity would be allowed to flourish because it is prior to the retrospective bifurcation of experience: things are as they are without the adulteration of language. In without-thinking, there is a lack of conceptualization, and thereby without-thinking lacks its limits. The experiential field is open. However, language is not sufficient to get us to experience this pre-linguistic original experience. In fact, as Eugene Herrigel suggests, "the mysterious happening can only be hinted at, but the core of it will be missed. All images and comparisons stem from other levels of experience."[45] This experience itself cannot be *comprehended* through language, nor can it be conceptualized. The most that we can hope for from language is that it can point us

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[43] Kitaro Nishida, *Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 8.
[44] Kasulis, 74-75.
[45] Eugen Herrigel, *The Method of Zen*, edited by Hermann Tausend, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 106.

back to the original experience, send us back, as it were, dissolving the historically constituted reality to our original nature. In other words, the positive use of language is instrumental, functioning like an index, where it is not the words themselves that convey the message, but the experiential element that the words provoke that send us to experience ourselves that will ultimately bring us into an attunement with nature. This positive use of language and understanding we will refer to as indexical. It is through Nishida's discussion of pure experience that we find the grounds for suggesting that Zen aims to arrive at this pure experience, free from the binds of *samsara*. It is the linguistically pure plane of existence where experience has yet to be defiled. Our discussion will follow by looking at the positive use of the indexical mode of language in Zen.

## Chapter 3: Indexical Language: Use and Function

> The idea of the Masters is to show the way where the truth of Zen is to be experienced, but not in and through the language which they use and which we all use, as a means of communicating ideas. Language, in case they resort to words, serves as an expression of feeling or moods or inner states, but not of ideas, and therefore it becomes entirely incomprehensible when we search its meaning in the words of the Masters as embodying ideas. Of course, words are not to be altogether disregarded, inasmuch as they correspond to the feelings or experiences.[46]

Wary of the effect that language has on our understanding of the world, the Zen Masters set out to negotiate the problems posed by linguistic representation. The key for them is this state of "without-thinking" and "no-mind". How can this be achieved without falling into the web of representational accounts of experience? It is by emphasizing the experience itself that one can remove experience from the chains of language. The best that can be achieved through language is to set the stage, to create the conditions for this "personal" experience to occur. Indexical language will present something, say, the description of Lake Asuka, as in Akahito's famous haiku. It will point the way to, instead of dictating, attunement with our original nature. In so much as indexical language presents and points, the representational component or layer is negated. Descriptions are not judgment or assertions; they do not function in the manner of 'this is *x*'. Descriptions, ideally, allow for the experience to be had on an individual basis that is free from the enframing of language. Indexical language itself

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[46] D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 289.

works indirectly by calling us back to a "without-thinking" state, that is, the signifier gets thrown aside, opening the *possibility* of a pre-linguistic experience. The indexical is a mode of language that negates itself. It leads and points away from *samsara* and *samsaric* formulations of experience that occur within language and points the way back to the original non-dual experience. There is a certain rational gap, a-rational element, which sends us toward this intended direction. It is a-rational in that it is prior to the dichotomy of rationality and irrationality. Zen anecdotes function in this indexical manner. When the Master tells the two monks, one who had been to the monastery before and the other who had not, to "go have some tea", the Master does not mean to suggest that tea drinking is an activity inherently filled with Zen.[47] However, the Master is indexing the way of Zen. The teaching is not in the words themselves. If there is to be a teaching in them, it is through their negation and that towards which they point. When Chu-chih cut off his student's finger, who subsequently had a *satori* experience, Chu-chih was not attempting to punish him for mimicry.[48] This event did point the student back to his original nature. The loss of the student's finger was not the message. The message was in what the chopped finger pointed to.

We already explored the representational use of language in the previous chapter against

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[47] Chao-Chou, "Recorded Sayings" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 82.

[48] Wu-man, "Wumenkuan" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 90.

which the Zen Masters are revolting in Zen practice. Language is not used as a marker or sign of reality, but as a token which pushes us back to our primordial way in the world, unfiltered through the conceptual grid that forms our everyday experience. Indexical language, in that it is still language, does not put forth any claims (although it seems to). It is a language that negates its very presence as a medium and points directly to the source. By pointing directly to the experience, indexical language seeks to break from working from "saying to saying". Indexical language has the dual purpose of tearing away false formations foisted on reality and of pushing us towards pure experience.

In the Zen canon, the aesthetic way of life is encountered on every other page. Zen paintings, calligraphy, poetry, the solitary life, even rock gardens and meditation all have an aesthetic quality. The Masters are constantly exhibiting that Zen is found in these artistic expressions. The way out of *samsara* is found through these platforms. This is not to suggest that if you simply engage in these activities, you can or will overcome *dukkha*, but that there is something in these artistic expressions that is essential to the way of Zen. The Zen way of life is tied to the aesthetic. What these aesthetic platforms do, how they function, will help us understand the positive use language can have in Zen Buddhism. Zen takes up forms, and transforms them. Style, technique, and imagery all merge to negate representation.

A famous *haiku* by Akahito reads:

The mists rise over
The still pools at Asuka.
Memory does not
Pass away so easily[49]

If one were to approach this *haiku* in a representational manner, the way a literary critic would, we would gather that the mist over a lake passes rather quickly relative to the way that memory holds onto its content. We could read it specifically and say that the mist over Asuka passes quickly, but what is represented could also be abstracted into a larger class: Asuka represents a city in general. The specific city does not matter. By approaching the *haiku* in this manner, we have revealed a piece of 'knowledge', or more accurately, labeled a piece of information. The *haiku* compared two things: mist and memory, to the way in which they pass through time. We *know*, or at least know that from the author's perspective, mist passes through time easier than memory. If this is the message, if the content is the message, what would be the need for it to be communicated in such an indirect manner? Is the author's intent to give us a piece of information? If information were the goal, the *haiku* should read more like our analytical description, one you would find in a textbook. There would be nothing aesthetic about the way in which we approached this *haiku*. For a moment, let us try to "feel" what the *haiku* is showing us. It is as Bruce Lee says to his student in *Enter the Dragon*, "Don't think, feel". Bruce Lee told his student not to get lost looking at the finger

[49] Akahito, in *One Hundred Poems From The Japanese*, trans. Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1964), 7.

that was pointing to the moon. By looking at the finger, you miss what the finger it pointing to, in this case, the moon. The immediacy of the event is lost, giving its way to thinking. The immediate feeling comes directly from experience, while thinking takes place in the form of "comparative awareness"[50], which is a bifurcated experience into the subject/object dichotomy. Thinking is away from what is being pointed to, to what is pointing. Do not get bogged down in conceptual thought, let what presents itself flow to see what it is pointing at. Akahito has presented us with the image of an event. When we read it, the image presents itself to us. This is not to suggest that approaching the *haiku* in a representational way does not give us an image, though it most likely will not. Image and representation are not polarized. For example, when I say to a friend, "I played the drums, and then I ate a sandwich", the image of those actions taking place does not, out of necessity, accompany the understanding of what happened. Experience will tell us that sometimes, when we are not being particularly attentive and someone recounts a story, we only hear the sound of the voice and "translate" those sounds into their corresponding words to distinguish the intended meaning. If we are not somewhat enchanted, captivated, by what we are receiving, to paint a picture of what was being communicated, the canvas would not come as easily. The distinction lies in the next move after the stage has been set. The direction moves away from

[50] Ta-Hui, "Swampland Flowers" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 123.

the actual experience that Akahito had into what the content of the message was. The use of language in Zen's aesthetics is meant to evoke a personal and experiential element, something not contained within the words themselves or the grammar or syntax. Certainly, there is always the opportunity to take the experience in another direction, say toward analysis for academic pursuits, but Zen's aesthetic use of language attempts to touch us, to resonate with us on a personal level. Conventional meaning does not have this affective component to it. It is indifferent to us. What Akahito's language is doing is attempting to trasmit the experience he had to the reader. What is transmitted is not that he, Akahito, had watched this mist pass quickly over Asuka (while he was lost in some recollection of times past), but the experience of that feeling of memory lingering on in the midst of a rapidly changing environment, the Buddhist theme of the impermanence of things. He wants us to feel how smoothly the events of nature take place, and how rigidly our inner states, like memory, pass through time.

The question to ask here is why is this primordial or pure experience preferable? Following this we would also be right to ask, how does this indexical language give us access to pure experience? Ta-Hui, Zen Master of the Sung Dynasty, writes in *Swampland Flowers*,

> That which flows out of one's own breast...is one's own beginningless present awareness, fundamentally complete of itself. As soon as you arouse a second thought, you fall into comparative awareness. Comparative awareness is something gained from external refinements; present awareness is something from before your parents were born.[51]

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[51] ibid.

One of the pitfalls of representational language is that it naturally moves to a comparative understanding. Akahito's *haiku* is not intended so that comparative awareness can analytically understand the content. The pure experience, experience of the "beginningless present", necessarily evades language. The *haiku* pushes us back to the "beginningless present" where we can experience reality as it is without the conceptual distinctions that language pushes us toward and imposes on us. It is by this that the Zen Masters maintain that it is not the words used or their meaning that is useful for encountering our original face.

Ultimately for Zen, words are meaningless and unable to capture reality. What 'captures' reality for the Zennists are these pure experiences of the "beginningless present", experiences that are not formed by language, but are from the natural itself "flowing out of one's own breast" and are able to escape the enframing of language. The situation is like having never seen a philodendron and having a friend describe in detail all of its features. You might be able to get the *idea* of what a philodendron is having never experienced one, but this idea is not what a philodendron *is*. You arrive at a "comparative awareness" by putting this new idea against other similar ideas, by comparing and contrasting.

The Zen Master's analyses of the shortcomings of language alone are not enough to get us to our "original face". All that Zen can do "in the way of instruction is to indicate, or to suggest, or to show the way so that one's *attention* may be directed towards the goal. As to

attaining the goal and taking hold of the thing itself, this must be done by one's own hands."[52] It is for this reason that such an emphasis is placed on the aesthetic as a perfect medium. It can enable the student to see what is being pointed to and to "feel" it with his/her own "hands".

Words, teachings and doctrines alone cannot get the student to the 'other side'. It is something that primordial experience alone, when realized as the natural order of things, can do. Zen arts are not mimetic: their task is not the representation of mountains, trees, and rivers. At their core, Zen aesthetic expressions seek to evoke a response other to its medium, while, at the same time, mystifying experience so as to avoid absolutizing it. In as much as the aesthetic use of language negates itself, that the message is not contained within the words used, an objective, absolute, meaning from the meaning is absent. Multiplicity emerges from the crumbling of singularity, and by this token the unknown, the mystery presents itself. It is in this way that aesthetic media can help facilitate a return back to the "beginningless present".

As was discussed in the previous chapter, "mystery" implies that element of the unknown that accompanies phenomena of experience. It is what is unable to be conceptualized and thus remains outside of language. There is a mystery of experience, a mystery of what is disclosed

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[52] D.T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 62. italics my own

and what is not. It is from the release of representational language that the mystery presents itself. When representational language no longer dictates what the phenomena are, the experiential field opens up to reveal its indeterminate nature. This indeterminacy is the mystery of experience. The aesthetic non-constituting quality of indexical language relates to the Japanese concept of *yugen*:

> Yu, the first component of the word yugen, usually connotes faintness or shadowy-ness, in the sense that it rather negates the self-subsistent solidity of existence, or that it suggests insubstantiality, or more accurately the rarefied quality of physical concreteness in the dimension of empirical reality. Gen, the second component of the word, means dimness, darkness, or blackness. It is the darkness caused by its depth, that is to say, the darkness in the region of unknowable profoundity.[53]

This element of "unknowable" mystery comprises *yugen*. Indexical language functions on the axis of *yugen*, contrary to what we saw with representational language functioning on the axis of "truth". *Yugen* shows reality in its *inessence* or non-essence, which, for Zen, is the nature of reality. *Yugen* is "fundamentally related to the awareness of existence."[54] This is the direction that indexical language takes: it points to the essence of inessence of reality, breaking apart any formulations that would lay claim to essences. *Yugen* is the central idea in all Zen art. Heinrich Dumoulin tells us that, "Zen Buddhist ink paintings point to transcendence. The multidimensionality suggested by the ink shades and simple strokes ranging from hair-thin threads to excessively thick and heavy lines, lets the viewer know that

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[53] Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 27.
[54] Ibid; 28.

all knowledge is but a foreground of something deeper and greater."[55] Transcendence is a problematic concept considering the Mahayana position of the non-duality between *nirvana* and *samsara*, but the point being made is that through the viewing of the painting, or through aesthetic media, the element of *yugen* is present. This "something deeper and greater" is that mysterious quality that our experience latently contains within itself.

The ability to take us back to our original face, the space that is created which allows for us to turn inwards and experience reality for ourselves is how the Zen Masters would consider language to be positive. This experiential element, simply put, is an experience that allows itself to be manifest without recourse to different levels of consciousness, for example, categorical understanding and comparative awareness. It is what Nishida calls "pure experience". The experiential element is that basic, baseline experience before it has been objectified, its naturalness; it is the way it is from the "beginningless present". This sounds phenomenological in that there is a call for a return to the things themselves, which gives birth to the natural way of phenomena. Zen's 'phenomenology' and Husserl's phenomenology differ in their attitude to language. While Husserlian phenomenology will seek to give an analysis based on the phenomena speaking for themselves, Zen will claim that this stage of description has already been constructed with recourse to the ontology inherent

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[55] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China* (Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2005), 283.

in the working of language. For Zen, nature ("the things themselves") is only given as it is when language is removed. That is, in silence nature presents itself. Once language has shaped thoughts *about* reality, it is no longer nature, it is *languaged* experience filtered through its categorical distinctions, only a historical and relative disclosure of phenomena. Zen aesthetics carries the message of a return to the unobjectified. This is not a necessary feature, or a necessary outcome, but in these media the potential to evoke the "beginningless present" lies dormant. As Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu comment,

> the beauty of yugen is faint, delicate, suggestive because it is based on the awareness of insubstantiality and delimitation of the human existential field. It is a beauty of spiritual aspiration and yearning motivated by the desire to have sensuous images of the non-articulated, non-sensuous reality of eternal silence and enigma in the midst of the phenomenal world.[56]

Akahito's poem can bring us back to this ahistorical place. It can connect us with that feature of our human condition that gets covered up in everydayness. The aesthetic can help push us towards that essential statement of Zen:

> Without relying on words and writings,
> A special transmission outside the scripture
> Pointing directly to the human mind
> Seeing your own nature and become Buddha.[57]

The indexical use of language in Zen can be said to make both the signifier and the signified inert. In the representational use of language, the signifier is linked to the signified. For instance, "pen", as a piece of language, is *attached* to this material pen I hold in my hands.

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[56] Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, 28.
[57] Bodhidharma, 10.

The meaning is generated from the convention that the word "pen" refers to objects that have these pen-qualities. Even if this is but a convention, a [necessary] relationship between the word and its object is suggested here. They reinforce each other as being of one and the same thing: the object, on the one hand, and the word, on the other. However, for the indexical language whatever is being signified from the signifier is beyond signification. There is no direct relationship between the experience of the poem and what it is referring to. There is no intention of the signifier to correspond to a specific signified. The question of what is being signified then yields no consistent answer as there is no object. The nature of the indexical language is that it has an unknown signified. What the signifier does "point" to is for the listener to turn inwards and see for themselves what is being signified. This is what is meant when we say indexical language negates itself. When we read Akahito's poem, we are not all called back to the "beginningless present". If there were a direct link between the language used and what the Zen Master was trying to impart to the student, then, at the utterance of the Zen Master, we would all become emancipated. This would suggest a button could be pressed which would take us back to our original nature. As Master Ta-Hui comments,

> All you disciples of Buddha, real mind is not fixed, and real wisdom is not bound. Even if I let these two lips go on talking from now till the end of time without break, you still can't depend on another person's powers: this is a matter in which each and every person is fully sufficient in his own right.[58]

The emphasis Master Ta-Hui places on the practitioner is because the "beginningless present"

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[58] Ta-Hui, 118-119.

is not something fixed that can be described and understood like a lecture on cell structure. No matter how many sermons and lectures one absorbs in one's life time, our original face can only be arrived at through our own efforts.

A poem of Dogen speaks about how he looks at a peach tree and then experiences *satori*.[59] If representation holds true, there must be some correlation between seeing the peach tree and the experience of *satori*. This is not the case, however, as not all visions of peach trees induce *satori*. If the representational account could accurately capture reality as it is, then the referent of seeing a peach tree would automatically bring about *satori*. Even if we situate the experience of *satori* as evoked from words, the same problem would present itself: Where are the necessitating grounds for this experience in the relationship between the two? When the monk asks Chao-chou if a dog has Buddha-nature and Chao-chou replies "*Mu*"[60], what brings about the experience of *satori* for the monk? There is no inherent link between the linguistic meaning of *Mu* and *satori*. The link between the two, for this monk, was that the occasion for this reply brought about a confrontation with his original face. This signified was entirely accidental, logically speaking, as there is no necessary connection between the two. Herein lies the force of Zen: the spontaneous ability to point us towards a truly

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[59] Steve Heine, 101.

[60] Wu-men, "Wu-men-kuan" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 89.

individual, and thereby creative, experience that is free from the grips of language and historical culture.

An apt comparison with Zen is the music of John Cage. While Cage's contributions to music are highly controversial, his Zen influence is unquestionable. Cage considered himself a student of D.T. Suzuki and, during Suzuki's time at Columbia University, Cage even had the occasional dinner with him.[61] As Cage writes, "What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt I would have done what I have done.[62] Our purpose is not to say, "Look at the musical compositions of John Cage; here we have what we could call 'Zen Music'." Cage himself cautioned against this. What is of interest to us is how the music of Cage functions and in what way we can say that his compositions take part in the indexical use of language.

When you first listen to a composition by Cage, you are confronted with something unfamiliar in the musical tradition. The melodic element almost disappears in favour of a non-traditional rhythmic structure. What presents itself to the ears sounds like an amalgamation of 'noise'. In as much as the music is a composition of 'noise', there is no place for it to go. When listening to traditional classical music, and even contemporary music,

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[61] John Cage, "Composition as Process" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 40.
[62] Ibid; xi.

there is a certain progression in the composition that is building towards, or taking away, to get some place. This is even suggested in labeling parts of musical compositions as *movements*. These forms of music have a *telos*. However, when listening to a Cage piece, for example, *Our Spring Will Come (1943)*, we are not heading anywhere.[63] This is a composition for the prepared piano, where screws, erasers, and bolts are placed in between the strings of the piano. We can hear both regular piano tones, as well as prepared tones in this composition. What this produces is an "unnatural" piano sound. Sounds—notes—present themselves not as components of a melody, notes tied together with other notes, but as the notes themselves—sound as sound. A *crescendo* is only heard as a *crescendo* when the note is retained and laid against the one preceding it. Melody is the function of memory. In a sense, we can say that Cage seeks to get to a music without memory. Memory serves as that template for present and future experience, or as Deleuze and Guattari write, "memory has a punctual organization because every present refers simultaneously to the horizontal line of the *flow* of time, which goes from an old present to the actual present, and the vertical line of the *order* of time, which goes from the present to the past, or to the representation of the old present."[64] As the function of memory is to preserve a certain order of the flow of time, memory becomes a dictator of present and future time. What Cage's compositions indicate is

[63] This period in Cage's work is considered to be before his Zen influence, but similar ideas present themselves.
[64] Deleuze and Guattari; 294-295.

the primal way we hear, to bring our ears back to their source as the listener of sounds and away from the intellectual interpretation of the auditory field. They seek to remove memory, by becoming an anti-memory music.

This discussion of memory and non-sensation as contrasted with sensation was first brought up in Plato's *Philebus*. Without falling into Plato's ontology and epistemology relying on the notion of recollection and the distinction between true and false judgments about reality, we can follow Plato in distinguishing between that which is sensed (the sensation), that which is understood from the sensation, and that what is understood from the sensation is derived from non-sensation. "When a man detaches the judgments he has once formed and uttered from the impression of sight (or other sense), and, so to say, contemplates the images within himself of the old judgments and propositions."[65] Memory, which is itself non-sensation, is the backdrop for future sensations. However, this is not based on sensation, it is derived from that which is not sensed. We can suggest for Cage that he is calling for a return to the pure sensation of the ear.

While the tones are unnatural for a piano, they are still tones, viz., sounds which present themselves. Cage suggests, "if the word "music" is sacred and reserved for eighteenth and nineteenth century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of

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[65] Plato, Philebus, trans. A.E. Taylor (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), 151.

sound."[66] This more meaningful expression marks a turn back to the origins of 'music': the pieces that become a composition when organized. Cage was taking 'musical' expression away from the tradition that was submerged in the aesthetic ideal and back toward the organic or natural way in which we hear sound prior to its conceptualization. Cage's experiments were a reaction to the history of music that suggested compositions signified *something*. For Cage, organizations of sound do not represent anything, in fact, if they did represent something, it would be nothing—no-thing—the beginningless present where *things* have not yet been born. These organizations by Cage function in the manner akin to the indexical use of language. They bring us back, indirectly, to sound as sound, 'noise' as 'noise'.

Performance for Cage takes a peculiarly 'Zen' twist. It is a style he labeled "indeterminacy", and, though he did not invent this method of performance, he certainly pushed it in new directions with *The Music of Changes*. *The Music of Changes* was born out of the Chinese classic, the *I Ching*, which is a series of trigrams and hexagrams depicting different elements of existence. Cage had acquired a copy of the text and began to work out a composition based from it. He used a modified version of the charts and began throwing coins at it to establish the duration of notes, the dynamics of the notes, and the tempo for the given composition. Each time *The Music of Changes* was to be performed, this process would

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[66] John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 3.

be repeated, thus generating an entirely different composition.

> An experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen. Being unforeseen, the action is not concerned with its excuse. Like the land, like the air, it needs none. A performance of a composition which is indeterminate of its performance is necessarily unique. It cannot be repeated. When performed for a second time, the outcome is other than it was. Nothing is therefore accomplished by such a performance, since that performance cannot be grasped as an object in time. A recording of such a work has no more value than a postcard; it provides a knowledge of something that happened, whereas the action was a non-knowledge of something that had not yet happened.[67]

One could suggest, given Cage's musical outlook of returning to the source of sound, that the method of indeterminacy is the method of nature, or, better yet, the non-method of nature. It is a non-method, in so far as the outcome cannot be predicted. The way of the performance is by chance, depends on where the coins end up, and a repeat of the same performance is never likely to happen. If you were to stand outside and listen, you would hear the ambient sounds of the environment.[68] If you were to go stand outside and listen at the very same time the next day, you would hear an entirely different set of sounds from the environment. What the *Music of Changes* and the non-method of indeterminacy show us is the naturalness of creation. When unbound by traditional formulations and ways of doing things, a creative platform is available.

Indeterminacy is a feature that becomes prominent in Zen. We are told that *koans* have no specific answers. Based on the analysis given thus far, what can be said about the *koan*? We

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[67] John Cage, "Composition as Process" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 39.

[68] This is an area that Cage explored in his infamous composition 4'33". We will address this piece in the coming chapter.

know that *koans* are given to students from the Master as a part of their education. In order for students to 'progress' (a more accurate way to put it would be to peel back the layers of understanding gained through life) students are to give a response to the anecdote the *koan* posed. *Koans* often present paradoxical claims for which regular, logical responses cannot provide answers. Hakuin's famous *koan* asks "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"[69] This paradoxical question asks the student to provide a response to the case which seems to have no logical answer. Let's face it; no sound can be made from one hand clapping. The sound emerges when the second hand strikes the first hand. The actual act of clapping demands the use of two hands. One hand cannot clap or produce a sound when 'clapping'. The student, with all of his/her life experience, has no *answer* to the *koan.* The emphasis is on the word "*answer*" as this is exactly what the *koan* neutralizes. Answers are provided to give a *solution* to the problem posed. They are definite and can be used as a solution to the problem. For example, if someone is were to ask, "How do you get the squeak out of a door?" You might reply with, "grease the hinge". The answer evaluated the question in a logical manner, thought about the possible ways to remedy the problem, mapped out how effective the proposed solution would work and then provided the answer. The first striking thing about the *koan* is that there are no *answers*. A solution, strictly speaking, cannot be

[69] Hakuin, *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Haukin*, trans Norman Waddell (Boston: Shambhala, 1994),

found. A question about a greasy hinge can be solved, but the question about the sound of one hand clapping has no answer—it is a paradoxical question.

> If you call a bamboo staff a "bamboo staff", you are simply hypostatizing the meaning of the word into a separate, self-subsistent substance, falsely articulating Reality as it really is in its limitless openness. If, on the contrary, you refuse to admit that it is a bamboo staff, if you say that it is *not* a bamboo staff, then you are going against the fact that Reality here and now is appearing in the phenomenal form of a bamboo staff.[70]

What *koans* attempt to do is to cause a *disruption* in our everyday reasoning. By frustrating representational thinking, by backing it into a corner and rendering it ineffective, the student is forced to come up with a new kind of *response* to the question posed. This disruption begins to peel back the layers of conventional experience. The way we have been conditioned to think is useless, but, in the midst of the shedding of representation, a new way to think opens up, a new way to use language emerges. "The *koan* is intended to be nourished in those recesses of the mind where no logical analysis can ever be reached."[71] By stripping away conceptual thinking, the *koan* helps to point the student back to the "beginningless present". The language of *koans* have no specific meaning, no signified, while, at the same time, signifying a return to the "beginningless present". *Koans* are only an indexical tool used in Zen to disrupt representational thinking so as to get students to experience their "original face".

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[70] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1982), 107.
[71] D.T. Suzuki, *Introduction*, 77.

Once the student has come up with a response to the Master's *koan*, he will present it to him. It is the task of the Zen Master to 'evaluate' how deep the student's understanding is. If the Master deems the student's response inadequate, that the student has not broken through the filter of representation, the Master might respond in some very unusual ways. Slapping and yelling at the student are common practices. These are not punishments, but tools to provide a "shock of being", to help jar the student out of the conceptual prison. They are exercises in compassion. The student, having thought that he had generated a response to the *koan*, emerges with a kind of confidence, only to be crushed by the grabbing of his nose. This humbling erodes the confidence in the analytical method. It is only by producing a uniquely individual response that one can 'pass' a *koan*. It does no good to present another monk's response as your own, as this response has not come from within. It was not a response generated from your own confrontation with the "beginningless present". The creative plane is what generates a response to the question posed. When a response comes from this plane, there is no recourse to representational thought. The paradoxical statement is not encountered as a paradox. It is a springboard for creativity, free of all mental barricades imposed by language and its formal rules. It breaks through the subject-object dichotomy, treading along the path that all Buddhas have walked before.

We arrive at the central problem for all sects of Buddhism: the Self, the cause of *dukkha*.

While other sects maintain that *atman*, or the self, is the cause of attachment and craving, Zen will suggest, yet again, that the self is the creation of the representational use of language and of *samsara*. By moving to the indexical use of language, one can overcome the limits of the self, of which craving and attachments are a product. Indexical language is non-egological. We have already discussed how representation breeds an egological framework in the previous chapter, but what is it about the indexical use that is non-egological?

The first thing that needs to be looked at is the position that the subject takes in indexical language. In representational language, the subject stands at the center of experience constituting what the object becomes. The object is a product of the enframing by language. The chair becomes a chair through what is predicated of it, even the word "chair". These predications are for the *use* of the subject. In this sense, the subject constitutes what the object becomes and the kind of relations, or the way it can be engaged, is designated through this constitution. However, this constitution never gets to the heart of the matter. To borrow an idea from 20th century phenomenology: whenever something presents itself, the other side of it becomes invisible. As Heidegger suggests, "this bearing towards concealing conceals itself in the process, letting a forgetfulness of the mystery take precedence and disappearing in it."[72] That which does not present itself is still part of the object; yet, because it is not present,

[72] Martin Heidegger, *On the Essence of Truth*, in Basic Writings (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 131.

it escapes the enframing of language. Zen, however, is not concerned with the revealed and the concealed of phenomena. The result is that the languaging of the phenomenon is an inaccurate interpretation and distortion of what it is. From this perspective, what the object becomes, has to be taken as the accurate account of reality; alternatives are rendered impossible.

An objection to this interpretation would be that attachment and craving have to do with, not how language divides the world, but rather how the self attempts to bind itself to positive psychological factors and to push away negative ones, and thus our emphasis on language is misguided. The self seeks positive gratification and seeks to avoid negative, deprived responses. These positive intensities do not become what they are through the constitution of the self, but are positive intensities in and of themselves. For example, sexual desire is not born out of linguistic designation, but rather out of the body—something independent of language; desire is not a linguistic phenomenon. This line of thought possesses a relevant objection, and we will return to it momentarily.

First, let us ask if all attachments are causally derived from the body. The idea of dependent origination, and the twelve-fold causal link, explain craving as dependent on feeling, which is then dependent on contact, which is dependent on the six senses.[73] What

[73] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 53.

this means is that craving is not something primordial, as craving is for something, and is dependent on other factors, viz. contact and bodily sensations. Now, let us return to the question of sexual desire. It seems that sexual desire is born from the body and therefore a part of human existence independently of the self's constitution of reality. However, the object of sexual desire is solely a product of the self's constitutive activity. What we mean here is that the *what* of sexual desire, the content, is a product of the self. The particulars of the desire are produced from the self. For this reason, we can maintain that it is *languaging* from which craving ultimately stems. It is the self that is ultimately the cause of suffering. But, the self is only a linguistic-conceptual construct. If $x$ is desired, it is because $x$ is valuable. However, attaching value to $x$ is a cultural-social phenomenon. It is learned and internalized. Hence we are justified in claiming that *dukkha* arises from language.

How is it that the indexical use of language breaks the bonds of the egological constitution of reality? Indexical language is non-egological in that the position the subject takes within this mode is the position of "nowhere". The subject is not at the centre; it is not an actor or agent; it has a non-constituting role. The indexical lets phenomena be, free from what language makes of it. As opposed to predicating qualities designated subjects and enframing the phenomenon to become an object, the indexical mode allows for phenomena to speak for themselves, a true return to "things themselves".

This functions in the same manner as what Cage was trying to accomplish in his compositions, viz., to let the sounds present themselves as sounds; to let what is present itself as it is. It is by refraining from capturing the phenomenon that allows for it to present itself as it is. This letting things speak for themselves is non-linguistic. Were it to be put into language, it would no longer be in its natural state. Speech would fall silent if we tried to find words for it. This does not entail passivity on the part of the subject; in fact, the indexical is active in that it actively refrains from attempting to constitute the object. When an indexical utterance is made, what is being signified is not contained within the language, it is other to it. In this sense, the indexical points to the "beginningless present" where language has yet to discriminate the object. The position of the indexical is non-egological in that it pushes the individual to experience reality beyond language's enframing. It is prior to the split between objects that are encountered by a subject. What the indexical points to is the "suchness" of reality, that is, the world as non-constructed through conceptual distinctions.

Suchness implies the "beginningless present" as reality is in the form of no-thing. Suchness contains no predication of its being; suchness is as it is. No reference to either being or non-being is made. In as much as it is suchness, there is no languaging of the phenomena. From the perspective of suchness, the self is not at the center of reality—all of reality becomes decentralized. The non-egological function of the indexical use of language brings

us back to the "time" when reality was still in its natural formation. When language signifies reality, when it becomes constructed, the suchness is appropriated into qualities. The suchness which was no-thing takes on a thingly character thereby centralizing the subject who formulated reality through language. The self becomes the epicenter of reality, but only in the limited way that it can be represented. The freedom of nature is confined in the hands of the self and its representational language.

The constituting element of representation puts man at the center of the world for all is known through thought. Hence, an anthropocentric worldview is derived. But Zen would tell us that our position, the human, is nothing special which reigns over nature. "A monk asked Yun-men, "What is Buddha?" Yun-men replied, "A dried shit-stick."[74] Even the Buddha is nothing more than another part of nature. Trees, mountains, and rivers all have Buddha-nature. This does not necessarily mean that they are sentient, but rather that they are all the same with regard to their value—even the Buddha. None has a higher authority over another with regard to their being. Equal in Buddha-nature is equal in position. Through the representational use of language, the user is falsely elevated to a higher status of the constituting self. Back at the "beginningless present", we are confronted with suchness where all possess Buddha-nature. "All possesses" is potentially misleading as in fact, there is really

[74] Wu-men, "Wu-men-kuan" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 100.

no differentiation between things; there is a totality—suchness—a world of processes. With the representational position, categories and comparison come to the forefront. With comparative analysis comes preference for one or the other. Craving and attachment follow which is *dukkha.*

Seng-Ts'an's poem, *Trust in Mind,* demonstrates these ideas about the error of the constituting self:

> In true Dharma there is no this or that,
> So why blindly chase desires?
> Using mind to grasp mind,
> Is the original mistake.[75]

The error of the understanding is when it takes what has been represented to it, that which was constituted, and uses that conceptual apparatus to further investigate the truth of reality. The world has already been sliced up into a world of things—"this or that". As Seng-ts'an notes, "in true dharma there is no this or that", the truth of reality is prior to its construction by the self. This is due to the lack of position that the 'self' takes. When there is no "this or that", when the world presents itself as suchness, it is non-egological. If we look back at Cage's *Our Spring Will Come*, the composition attempts to present the sounds as they are without the self's constitution of it into various musical categories. This indexical composition takes away the position the self can take thereby allowing for the sounds to

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[75] Seng-Ts'an, "Trust in Mind" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan,* edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2008), 16.

present themselves as they are without the self's constitution. It points back to the moment prior to "this or that", the "beginningless present".

Seng-ts'an continues:

> Nothing here, nothing there,
> But the universe is always before you.
> Infinitely small is infinitely large:
> No boundaries, no difference.[76]

Just because the understanding moves to a non-egological position, the position of "Just let be!"[77], does not mean that the world plunges into nihilism. Constituted reality or *samsara* is not the source of all meaning. The world "is always before you"; nature in its naturalness is present, meaningful in and of itself. This meaningfulness is different from the dichotomy of meaning and meaninglessness which haunts the question of nihilism. An inherently egological position is presupposed in the distinction between meaningful and meaningless. "In true nature, there are no goals or plans"[78]. Nature is as it is: independent of the self's constitution; independent of what language can say *about* it. After all, we are just a part of the "ten thousand things", or as Lao-tzu suggests, we are nothing more than "straw dogs". Goals and plans are a product of the self, which manufactures them, mired as it is in representational use of language. In the indexical, there is no room for goals or plans to manifest themselves, only a pushing of the understanding to encounter reality. As Chao-chou

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[76] Ibid; 18.
[77] Ibid; 16.
[78] Ibid; 17.

comments, "A monk asked "what are the words of the ancients?" A Master said, "Listen carefully! Listen carefully!"[79] Nothing else was said to the monk. What the monk is to listen to carefully is nature, when words and the chatter of language cease. It is in nature that one will find the words of all the past Masters, all the discourses of the Buddha, all sects, for all of Zen can be understood from going back to its source.

In the indexical use of language, the law of identity, namely, A is A, breaks down revealing the limitless possible ways the world is able to manifest itself. This brings us back to *sunyata*, to the plane from which all constitutions of reality stem, although the plane itself lies outside the defilement of language. The rules of representation reveal themselves only to be a particular slicing up of the world at the hands of the self, based on the position it has taken towards the world and towards itself. The laws of 'thinking' now present themselves as contingent, relative to the position of seer and seen.

As was suggested before, representational language is part of a survival technique to deal with nature's destructive forces. A technique for dealing with nature was needed to ensure survival. However, nature is indeterminate; there is a mystery to its workings. "Everything in this or any other world is without intrinsic nature, or any nature that manifests itself. They are just empty, as the word "empty" that describes them. If you regard only names as reality, you

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[79] Chao-chou, "Recorded Sayings" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2008), 78.

are making a big mistake. Even if anything exists, it is the act of changing."[80] What Rinzai is alluding to is the indeterminacy of nature. While "intrinsic nature" are indeed words used by him, they refer to the essence of things. The formulation of nature with recourse to its essence only, as a construct of language, is the "big mistake". The only truth of nature is that it is indeterminate. 'Natural' disasters are a testimony to this. Even with preparation and planning for them, they come unexpectedly. We are forced to submit to them, that is, we are left to pick up from what nature has brought unexpectedly. While the representational language would like to map out reality, and thereby control nature, it fails to do so.

Indexical language does not seek to determine or predict nature. "Just let it be! To the end, nothing goes, nothing stays."[81] This non-structure is implicit in the functioning of indexical language. The indexical does not speak *about* things; it points back to phenomena, and allows them to "speak". This speech is nothing fixed, it does not stay. Each time the indexical points, there is an indeterminacy to it. If there were a fixed essence, there would be no use for the index, because representation itself would simply have achieved its goal. However, according to Zen, this indeterminacy of reality needs a fluid medium to communicate suchness. This would be what we consider the positive use of language in Zen. It was the egological position

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[80] Lin-chi, "Lin-chi Record" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2008), 49.

[81] Seng-ts'an, "Trust in Mind" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2008), 16.

of representation that brought in determinacy, but, in the shift away from it, the position of the self also disappears. With the indeterminate feature of reality, the egological position has no place to stand; there is nowhere to ground experience. With the ground removed, a positionless, abyssal subject emerges. The non-egological position presents itself in the form of indeterminacy. A is A, and A is not-A are no longer impossibilities; both at the same time and yet neither, formal logic has been dethroned. This does not imply chaos, however, what is left is just the indeterminate functioning of nature—neither order nor chaos. The 'essential' feature of our existence remains a mystery. Since it is a mystery, it is not really an essence, but just indeterminate. Our essence is inessence. As Master Shih-t'ou comments, "I respectfully urge you who study the mystery, do not pass your days and nights in vain."[82]

What we have hoped to demonstrate in this chapter is how indexical language is the key to unlocking the kind of communication that takes place in Zen. Through the indexical language, we have shown how the aesthetic can allow Zen experience to occur. In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to musical experience, with its non-semantic content, to show how listening can bring about a shift from representational language to an indexical language that will allow for pure experience.

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[82] Shih-t'ou, "Harmony of Difference and Equality" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2008), 33.

## Chapter 4: Silence, Sound and the Return to Nature

The way of Zen is to be found in silence and where listening is given primacy. This chapter aims to show how a return to silence is fertile ground for encountering the "beginningless present". It is easy to say "let things be as they are", but what allows for the removal of the conceptual grid that has permeated our experiential field? What can really be said about silence? It is a phenomenon that appears to be negative in quality. Is silence merely the absence of sound, a lack, a vacuous quality or is there something else to it which allows us to think of it as something positive? Do we not run the risk of reifying silence? These questions will be discussed in this chapter.

In addressing the concern over what can be said of silence, John Cage's *4'33"* is helpful. In this composition, originally for the piano, not a single note is played on the keys. The pianist approaches the piano bench, sits down, opens the fall board, and then begins to read the sheet music which is comprised of three movements. The pianist follows the written music to the end of the piece and then closes the fall board. This "composition of silence" challenges our understanding of silence as a lack or as something negative, i.e., a negation of the sonorous. During the performance of this piece, while not a note is played on the piano keys or strings, many sounds are nevertheless heard—a chair rustles, an audience member

coughs, at a nearby window a bird sings. This leads to Cage's famous declaration "there is no such thing as silence", which is followed by, "something is always happening that makes a sound."[83] Silence is not a vacuum. Silence is positive in that whatever presents itself does so *out of* 'silence'—nature is always giving. Silence is a groundless ground, or "bottomlessness", a term borrowed from Nishitani's work *Religion and Nothingness*. All sounds are sounds of silence which is "bottomlessness"[84]. The point that Nishitani is trying to make is that the phenomena of experience are without a ground, and, in this sense, they are bottomless. We mentioned earlier that the "self" disappears, becoming an abyssal subject where the distinction between the seer and the seen is superseded. In this same regard, sounds present themselves from the non-foundation of silence, from "bottomlessness", revealing no substantiality, only suchness. Nishitani writes, "The emptiness of *sunyata* is not an emptiness represented as some "thing" outside of being and other than being. It is not simply an "empty nothing", but rather an absolute emptiness, emptied even of these representations of emptiness." [85] This "absolute emptiness" is the "bottomlessness". There can be no representative quality to *sunyata* because representation involves a grounding, a determination, and *sunyata* is groundless, just as silence is.

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[83] John Cage, "45' for a Speaker" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 191.

[84] Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 122.

[85] Ibid; 123.

To return to Cage, he tells a story about being at Harvard University where he was in an anechoic chamber, a sound deprived room where engineers can run tests without the interference of extraneous sound waves. Cage said that he "heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death."[86] Even this technological device that was intended to remove sound and thereby to create a silent environment, could not silence the body. What this demonstrates to us is that, no matter how much effort is made to silence the world, it cannot be done. "There is no such thing as silence." We will return to Cage momentarily, but first it is important to let silence speak.

Silence speaks of everything and of no-thing. It would be wrong to suggest that, in silence, the world loses its being, that it falls into some abyss of nihilism. Initially, it might seem so, but this is only because conceiving silence as a lack is *useless*. "Silence is the only phenomenon today that is "useless". It does not fit into the world of profit and utility, it simply is. It seems to have no purpose, it cannot be exploited."[87] It has no *use* and cannot be made into a thing, and thus is seen merely as a lack, a negation which stands outside and

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[86] John Cage, "Experimental Music" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 8.

[87] Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Goodman (Indiana: Gateway Editions Ltd., 1952), 18.

destroys all formulations of meaning. Silence cannot be appropriated by the world of productivity and it gets cast aside as purely negative. From the standpoint of productivity and usefulness, we can only have this vacuous view of silence. What is overlooked here is that it is from silence that the construction of the world becomes possible. Silence is not substantial and only allows for the presentation of nature, and the presentation of suchness.

Silence, as Zen speaks about it, confronts us with the "beginningless present". It shows reality as it is prior to the construction of it by of the self. Max Picard writes, "there is more help and healing in silence than in all the "useful things"."[88] "Help" and "healing" are effective words for Zen and Buddhism as they indicate what the student is trying to accomplish: the extinction of *dukkha*. When the Master asks the student to turn inward to find his/her way, and only an internal light can illuminate things, he means that all the "useful things" will not be of help here. Medicine, psychiatrists, vacations, and massage chairs will provide no help or healing if one has not stepped through the barrier and encountered one's "original nature". In silence, in its uselessness, we are confronted with this naturalness. Therefore, for Zen, the useless is of supreme importance as it stands outside reality as constituted through *dukkha*. One of many things silence can teach us is patience, and mindfulness that is needed to counter this construction of reality.

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[88] Ibid; 19.

"The song of the cuckoo, urges me to come home."[89] This space of returning home is created from the silence that emerges after the song of the cuckoo. It provides a pause in the busyness—business—of everyday. In Zen, as in Pali Buddhism, there is an emphasis on mindfulness. This is usually presented by way of contrast between the speed of our everyday life filled with *dukkha* and the careful attentive slowness that accompanies the non-egological position. We do find instances where the Master will demand that the student answer quickly the question posed to him. For example, "Call this a short staff and you're entangled. Don't call it a short staff and you ignore the fact. You cannot use words. You cannot use words. Speak quickly! Speak quickly!"[90] The Zennist will suggest that our everyday life is filled with a speediness, and driven by a need for efficiency to accomplish tasks. The speed that accompanies the life of suffering is symptomatic of the loss of access to our original nature. Things race at us forcing us to follow their lead. The ability to follow ourselves then withdraws as the constitution of reality allows for only one way for us to proceed. "Man no longer thinks, he has his thinking done for him."[91] The conceptual constraints of *samsara*, and what follows from them, have already been produced in a specific manner. The consequences or assumptions of this construction go unseen and unchallenged. They acquire

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[89] Wu-men, "Wu-men-kuan" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 89.

[90] Ibid; 109.

[91] Picard; 222.

an aura of naturalness. What we know is that this ready-made approach to reality only perpetuates *dukkha*. The speed that accompanies the represented world, does not allow space for reflection. The mindfulness that the Zen Masters praise is in service of returning to the natural, being able to counter the forces of representation.

In being mindful, a certain kind of carefulness is found, a carefulness that is reflective about what is being experienced. In being careful, a concern for what one is doing emerges. This does not mean that one becomes focused on enriching oneself or the world, but rather that attention is paid toward what one is doing and why. Intentions become fully accessible. What Zen is being "careful" about is the constructions of reality through the mechanisms of the self, and representational language. While this claim could be considered a function of conceptual thinking, and thereby itself representational in nature, we can recall what Kasulis labelled "not-thinking", where thinking acts negatively against itself. The point is that in being careful, which is a product of mindfulness, the way reality is constituted begins to be understood. The apparent naturalness of the *samsaric* world starts to diminish. Mindfulness allows for a receptivity to suchness.

Mindfulness, especially in *Soto* Zen, can be achieved through the practice of *zazen.* While the importance of *zazen* as a practice for arriving at the "beginningless present" is varied in the history of Zen, we can still look at it for what it is attempting to accomplish. *Zazen* is a

seated meditation where the practitioner engages in just sitting (*shikantaza*). It is a practice common throughout the Buddhist world, but it is particularly dominant in the *Soto* sect of Zen. Through this practice of *zazen*, Dogen tells us, the practitioner is able to break through all conceptualizations of reality. He writes,

> *Zazen* is not "step-by-step" meditation. Rather it is simply the easy and pleasant practice of a Buddha, the realization of the Buddha's Wisdom. The Truth appears, there being no delusion. If you understand this, you are completely free....The supreme Law will appear of itself, and you will be free of weariness and confusion. At the completion of *zazen* more your body slowly, and stand up calmly. Do not more violently.[92]

We get the impression right away, when Dogen is talking about *zazen*, that great care goes into the performance of the practice—move slowly and stand up calmly. The delusional views that pervade our everyday life fall away through the stilling of thought. *Zazen* itself is the enactment of mindfulness; it is cautious about what is being experienced. Usually our thought-process is like a buzzing bee flying from one thought to another in a split second. Thought is restless. As soon as thought grasps its object, it moves on to the next connection from that thought without rest. The process of thinking works like word association, where from each thought encountered another link is provided, and from that link, we move to another connection. This rapid succession of thought is what *zazen* is attempting to overcome. *Zazen* seeks to slow down cognitive processing. *Zazen* suggests that one should not fight the

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[92] Dogen, "Selected Writings" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 142-143.

flow of thought; if memories enter, pleasant or painful, let them enter and then let them pass on. Do not dwell on them. Having thoughts is natural, but getting bogged down in their associations is something entirely different. Zen tells us not to cling to thought: a variation on the Buddhist idea that one should not cling to the world of form. By letting thoughts flow naturally, entering and passing away, the Masters suggest that this will have a slowing effect on the mind. By slowing down the web of thought, the layers of delusion will fall away.

The ultimate emptiness of the world manifests itself in the silence of *zazen*; one is returned to the source, to the "beginningless present". While Dogen suggests that *zazen* is not a "step-by-step" process, that is, it is not a practice used to remove the deluded conception about the world, it is itself the Buddha's wisdom. Just sitting, Dogen says, is being a Buddha. The naturalness of being actualizes itself in *zazen*. Dogen means something similar to what Master Chao-chou noted in the *Recorded Sayings*. "A monk asked, "What is meditation?", The Master said, "It is not meditation". The monk said, "Why is it 'not meditation'?", The Master said, "It's alive, it's alive."[93] *Zazen* is not something other to the world, something that transcends the world. It is 'grounded' right here. It is alive just like the world. The emphasis that the Master puts on *zazen* being alive, is in response to the critics of the *Soto*

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[93] Chao-chou, "Recorded Sayings" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 75.

sect who maintain that *zazen* is far removed from practical living, and that it is a practice for a hermit who locks himself away from the world. In fact, Hakuin suggests that *zazen* should be done while standing in the market place, as opposed to a quiet mediation hall.[94] Even in the market place, a silence can emerge: the silence of no-mind and not-thinking. The purity of without-thinking allows for the world to present itself as it is. It is through listening that we arrive at the abyssal subject, which Nishida refers to as "seeing without a seer".[95] From absolute emptiness, the "bottomlessness" of experience, a non-dual seeing, a non-dual listening gives suchness, viz., the world in its naturalness. "The things they are in themselves, where they are on their own home ground, just as they are in their suchness, are one with emptiness."[96] The sounds of the market place themselves are the sounds of naturalness, of *sunyata*, and of suchness. "In this world, we eat, we shit, we sleep and we wake up, and after all that, all we have to do is die."[97]

Normally our thought process is rather quick, causing a certain carelessness, a neglect for what is going on around us—a lack of care for existence, for oneself, for others, and for the world. If carefulness is absent, then it is easy to loose oneself in *samsara*. "Zen is...knowing

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[94] Hakuin, *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Haukin*, trans Norman Waddell (Boston: Shambhala, 1994),

[95] James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 79.

[96] Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 123.

[97] Ikkyu Sojun, "Selected Poems" in *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea and Japan*, edited by Stephan Addiss, Stanley Lambardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008), 205.

thyself. You are a Western philosopher and you know of Socrates' quest. Did you assume Zen would be something different?"[98] The path to overcoming *dukkha* is through "knowing thyself", which for the Buddhist is knowing "no-self".

What is evident here is a shift in the primacy we accord to the senses. Listening usurps the primacy of vision. We assume that "seeing is believing", but what Zen emphasizes is a shift towards the primacy of listening. It is by listening to the environment, by listening to the world, that one but becomes attuned with nature. Listening, for the Zennists, is the way to the natural, the way out of representational language, and finally the way out of *dukkha*. Zen does not seek to disregard sight or advocate blindness. For Zen, all senses are deceptive since the data from the senses is already caught in the web of representation. Sight, however, offers only one kind of direction and orientation toward the world. The Zen call for the primacy of listening stems from the need to "know oneself". Listening is not simply auditory awareness, it involves mindfulness. True listening is only heard from the abyssal subject who carries nothing with him. Listening to what is going on deep inside of thought, listening to the body, listening to the world is needed. Listening is caring, and it is by listening that we come to a realization, and a realignment with the Way. There is a receptive aspect of listening. When we listen, the sonorous comes toward us. In a sense, we open up to the world. There is a non-

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[98] Kasulis, ix.

constitutive element at work with listening. This is in contrast to vision, in that our eyes go out and capture the world. Vision gives privilege to objects, as vision is like a camera, capturing a static picture of its field. In vision, there is a constitutive element. Listening, on the other hand, involves a letting be of what presents itself.

> Attaining the heart
> Of the sutra,
> Are not even the sounds
> Of the bustling marketplace
> The preaching of the Dharma?[99]

It is the sounds of the world which are preaching the *Dharma*. The world speaks the natural, and if attention is paid to it, if we are listening to it, the Way manifests itself. Let us look at an example that illustrates how listening produces a kind of slowness that gets carried over in our daily life. Say you are walking down a busy city street. Vehicles are passing by, people walking by are engaged in conversation, a horn sounds and you hear a loud "Bang!" You stop and look towards where the sound came from. What you see is a car crash. The normal processing of the world was jarred by this sudden change in the soundscape. The soundscape brought about attention. Attention was focussed toward the location of the sound of metal crunching. Everyday processes were suddenly suspended by this event, which caused thought to slow down. Caution emerged, mindfulness is adopted, a care for beings confronts us. It is

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[99] *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, ed. by Steve Heine (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 97.

care, in that there is a turning away from the busyness that removes us from ourselves. While it is not the sound that causes this inward turn, it gives the platform for which this event can take place. It is for this reason that there is a primacy of listening for Zen.

Hopefully, with listening, the web of representation can be neutralized. Jean-Luc Nancy asks, "hasn't philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something that might be more on the order of understanding."[100]? What Nancy is suggesting is that, through philosophy, or what we have been calling representational language, the sonorous becomes a product *for* the understanding to conceptualize and compare. What is sonorous becomes a product of the understanding, it becomes *languaged*, and is not a "pure" listening. The sonorous has always already been overtaken by representation. But "pure" listening, we can postulate, must be prior to the understanding of the sonorous. Understanding the content of the sonorous is the function of representational language, while listening allows for the sonorous to present itself outside of representational limits and those dualisms such as listening and listener, seeing and seer. Listening allows for the presentation of suchness, because to listen to nature is to listen without a listener. There is no "this" or "that", only the *sunyata* of the sonorous. The abyssal subject hears *sunyata*, the "bottomlessness" of silence from which the sonorous comes forth.

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[100] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 1.

Now, returning to Cage's *4'33"*, we will attempt to show that *4'33"* functions indexically, and it is through listening that the shift in the use of language occurs. While there is much debate over whether or not *4'33"* really is a musical composition, or if it can even be considered a performance piece, these discussions do not interest us here. These distinctions, on which the careers of musicologists are based, make no difference to us, or, more importantly, to Zen. "How does the 'piece' work" is our only concern. If we are going to see how *4'33"* can be of value for Zen, we must try to see, or listen to, what it is pointing to.

The idea behind *4'33"* was to create a piece of "silence". As we have discussed, there is no such thing as "pure" silence, so we must first ask what role do sounds play in the performance of *4'33"*? When the pianist approaches the bench and begins, what role does the audience member coughing or the bird singing through the window have? Are these sounds external to the piece; do they not belong to it, acting as an impediment to the silence? If the sounds were thought of as an impediment to the silence, then they would be considered external to the piece. However, from our earlier discussion, silence is not the absence of sound; in fact, silence understood in this way is impossible. Sounds are always present, as we saw with the anechoic chamber. This leads us to suggest that the sounds that occur during a performance of *4'33"* are an essential part of it. The bird singing and the cough are part of the performance. If these contingent soundscapes are part of what *4'33"* is, then *4'33"* is never

consistent; it is never the same. It is indeterminate and it always allows the natural to present itself.

*4'33"* is a piece of indeterminacy; just as nature's processes cannot be determined, *4'33"*, acting as a platform for the soundscape of nature, cannot be either. If *4'33"* were to be performed right now, a different soundscape would present itself—perhaps an audience member still might cough though it would be an entirely different cough, and if we were indoors with no windows, sounds such as the bird's song could not be heard. We do not know what we are going to encounter. Nature itself is contingent and mysterious. If you were to a performance of Beethoven's 5th, you would hear Beethoven's 5th. If you were to attend a performance of Hiromi's Sonicboom, you would hear Hiromi's Sonicboom. While each of these performances will undoubtedly take on a character of its own in the way the timpani are played in the 5th, or the open 'jam' space during much of Hiromi's Sonicboom where the instrumental solos are different each time they are performed, you will still recognize that this is the 5th or this is Hiromi's Sonicboom. With *4'33"*, however, there is no such character or essence. Even the performer does not know what will manifest itself. The non-intentional element of *4'33"* is worth considering. In the performance of Beethoven's 5th or Hiromi's Sonicboom, there is an intention of the performers over and above any intent on the part of the composer. The way the timpani are struck, the *dynamics* of the string section are a product

of what the players are trying to express, trying to communicate. When Hiromi extends a certain phrase over the bar line, there is an intention to place these notes in that particular way. *4'33"*, however, presents us with non-intention. This is not simply a negation of intention. The cough and the bird's song were present but not because of any intention on the part of the performer, or even Cage for that matter. The performer is powerless as to what will present itself during the performance. He/she is also unable to produce an intentional sound, since the sheet music for *4'33"* is blank. Arguably, what appears on sheet music is the intention of the composer, and the performer has to communicate these very notes, with these dynamics, in these rhythmic variations, etc. When the sheet music has no notes, no dynamics and no rhythmic structure, the intentions of the composer are absent. The only thing a performer can do then is to follow the time signature and allow for what presents itself to present itself. *4'33"* allows all things; it does not discriminate. It is non-imitative and non-mimetic. *4'33"* presents itself as natural, indeterminate, and with neither intention nor teleology, comprising of all "ten thousand things". A performance of *4'33"* is an occasion for the audience and the performer to return back to the natural and away from the representational understanding of reality. *4'33"* points back to the unobjectified. Recall that, "The Master said, "Listen carefully! Listen carefully!"[101] All sounds present themselves as they are: the cough as

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[101] Chao-chou; 78.

sound, the bird's song as sound. *4'33"* calls us to listen, and to listen carefully to what is being heard: the natural soundscape, which is the *dharma* itself.

Another important function of *4'33"* is the relationship between the audience and the performer. This relationship between the two has much to do with intention. When the performer presents something with intention, there is a strict division between performer and audience members. The performer is presenting the audience with something prepared, something intended. The performer is active in the presentation of the piece, while the audience members are passive observers taking in what is being sent their way. If a sound external to the piece being performed was to enter the auditory field, it would be considered other than the composition, as only the intentional elements comprise the composition. All other sounds would then be a disruption. But for Zen, the distinction between audience and performer, between active and passive, is rejected. There is no longer the distinction between audience and performer; the "beginningless present" is given with a non-egological position—the position of nowhere.

*4'33"* traces the path back to where the laws of thought have not yet been formulated. As the sounds present themselves and fall away, their being cannot be captured or thematized. The qualities attributed to sounds are a product of other levels of consciousness, namely, those we previously called "comparative awareness". Sounds present themselves as

becoming, passing through time and then falling away. What this means is that there is no identity, only impermanence. The representational act of conceptualization runs into a hurdle here. The world opens up and the closed representational account is forced open through the return to the "beginningless present". Silence brings back the time before linguistic designation.

We can also think of *4'33"* in terms of *zazen*. In the slowness of *zazen*, the layers of deluded experience become neutralized. Whatever comes to thought in *zazen* does so on its own accord and then passes away. There is no preference given to some thought over others, as they are all equal in Buddha-nature. They are all capable of bringing about *satori*, not because of their content, but because each thought has the ability to send us back to experience the "beginningless present". With *4'33"*, the same function is at work. No sound is better than any other sound; they are all equal in their ability to send us back. Whether it is a cough, or the sounds of construction, it makes no difference. Thought in *zazen* manifests itself only to fall away, as do the sounds in *4'33"*.

The primacy of listening can also be found in *Fukeshu* Zen. *Fukeshu* is a sect of Rinzai Zen which uses music as a form of meditation.[102] Their monks, called the *Komuso* (monks of emptiness), wear basket hats which cover their entire face to symbolize their adherence to the

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[102] James Sanford, "Shakuhachi Zen: The Fukeshu and Komuso" *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter, 1977): 412.

doctrine of no-self. They substitute for *zazen* the practice of playing and listening to the *shakuhachi*, a bamboo flute. This Zen practice is called *suizen*, or "blowing meditation".[103] The sounds emitted from the *shakuhachi* have the same effect as *zazen*, i.e., to return them back to nature.[104] As Gerald Groemer notes, in his liner notes to Kifu Mitsuhashi's *The Art of the Shakuhachi*, "the *komuso* thought of themselves not as mere musicians or entertainers; instead they regarded their activity as a form of Zen practice, *suizen* ("blowing meditation"). Their flute was considered not a musical instrument (*gakki*), but rather a *houki*, a "tool of (Buddhist) law."[105] The *komuso* "fathered mottoes like: "religion is music", "the breath of the flute is the way to illumination", and "a sermon is said with sounds"[106]. Historian, Max Deeg, contends that Zen enthusiasts have turned the *shakuhachi* into a "spiritualized Zen-instrument"[107], an idea not found in the tradition. Perhaps this is the case. The whole controversy over the legitimacy of the *Fukeshu* is shrouded in uncertainty, but the historical accuracy is of little importance for us. We are interested in looking at how the *shakuhachi* and

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[103] Gerald Groemer, Notes to *The Art of the Shakuhachi: Vol. 1 by Kifu Mitsuhashi*, CD Celestial Harmonies B00005Y2F1.

[104] There is a historical dispute over the legitimacy of the *Fukeshu*, as monks were given free passage through different regions in the *Tokugawa* period, which other members of society were not, particularly the *ronin* and *samurai*. Since the monks wore the basket hats concealing their identity, it would have been easy for the *ronin* to pass as a *Komuso* to gain free passage to other regions.[104]

[105] Groemer

[106] Akira Tamba, Notes to *Shakuhachi: Kinko School by Teruhisa Fukuda*, trans. Jeffrey Grice, CD Harmonia Mundi Distribution B0000CC625.

[107] Max Deeg, "Koumuso and Shakuhachi Zen: Historical Legitimation to the Spiritualization of a Buddhist Denomination in the Edo Period" *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 32 (1&2): 35.

the practice of *suizen*, which is founded on the primacy of listening, can be considered indexical.

When one listens to the kind of sounds that the *shakuhachi* produces, one feels a kind of "lightness". When it is accompanied with other instruments such as the *samisen* and *koto* drums, the notes of the *shakuhachi* float above all other sounds in a kind of gentle manner. In traditional court music, *gagaku*, the *samisen* and the *taiko* will generally play a busier part, more notes, while the *shakuhachi* creates the feeling that it is lagging behind or acting as the anchor to the rest of the accompaniment. Where these other instruments play busier rhythmic lines, the *shakuhachi* is mimicking the flow of water, "which allows for the expression of boundless sadness and loneliness."[108] It is as if the *shakuhachi* is taking the role of nature, the way it breaths life into the compositions, while, at the same time, the element of *yugen* is present in the way the notes are drawn out and withheld. The *shakuhachi* also gives an air of calmness to the composition that would be lost if it were not present. Like most of Cage's compositions, the music of the *shakuhachi* is predominately rhythmic in nature. The melodic element is kept to a minimum while bringing intricate rhythmic patterns to the forefront. By being more focused on rhythm, the *shakuhachi* can shape our experience of time. The kind of rhythmic patterns it utilizes can make one who is listening feel time differently. By giving

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[108] Groemer.

oneself over to the sound, the "time-feel"[109] of the piece can alter our experience of time. The sounds have the ability to speed up or slow down the way we experience the world. It is in this regard that we can suggest that our lived time is regulated through the act of listening. The rhythmic feel of the *shakuhachi* takes a much slower pace; the *shakuhachi* is usually dragging the time-feel. The spaces between notes, generally considered the silences or, properly speaking, the rests, are abundant. The *shakuhachi* utilizes the silence to create a dragging, a slowness in time-feel. Based on the kind of rhythm we hear, the way we relate to the world will be altered. Consider some rhythmic structures from Hiromi's Sonicboom. They can seemingly speed up our experience of time through listening. Clearly, the *shakuhachi* and Hiromi's Sonicboom are at opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to time-feels, but the point is that listening, and more importantly rhythm, is central to how we experience time. This can be further emphasized with recourse to the heartbeat, our most primal biological rhythm. When our heart rate is slow, we tend to be calm and relaxed than if it were beating at a faster rate. The primacy of listening begins to make more sense, for listening and our experience of time, a product of listening, are indexing the "beginningless present". The sonorous from the *shakuhachi* is the medium for pointing to suchness. In Teruhisa Fukuda's

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[109] The term "time-feel" is a prominent concept in the practice and performance of music. Having a good time-feel is the ability of the performer to produce the feeling, or experience, of time in different ways while still in the confines of the composition. For example, if a composition is to be played at quarter-note=60bmp, the performer can shift the time-feel by what is being played. To make the experience of time feel faster, they could play sixteenth-notes, to make the experience have an "odd time-feel" they could play on the up-beats.

performance of *Kuko-reibo* (Spiritual Quest for Vacuity), the commentator Tamba writes that the piece is "in fact a kind of programme music depiction of vacuity (*sunyata*) which musicians have a care to evoke in their performances."[110] Since the sonorous has no semantic content in *shakuhachi* music, it resists being integrated into a representational frame. By this token, the sonorous is a perfect tool for indexing, as it necessarily negates itself as a marker of meaning, as it has none to begin with. The sonorous can only function as a pointer, and this is what *Kuko-reibo* attempts to accomplish. The sounds of the *shakuhachi* in this composition point to *sunyata*, and suchness. Listening to the piece is an exercise in *suizen*. We could also say that the sonorous in its purity always and only points to suchness as semantic and conceptual content is necessarily absent. Listening, for Zen, implies a non-dual relation, for if there is a distinction between the listening and the listener, we will have already moved into a representational account of experience and away from the experience itself.

Returning to the birth of Zen and the *Flower Sermon*, we can see its importance in light of what we have said. The Buddha holds up a flower and Mahakasyapa experiences the "beginningless present". What brought about *satori* was not the flower itself. The flower itself did not contain within it the ability to bring about this change. It was what the flower was pointing to that brought about Mahakasyapa's *satori*. The flower was held up in silence

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[110] Tamba.

and Mahakasyapa listened. The sounds of silence presented themselves in their originality. The pre-linguistic experience was made present through the listening to nature, a listening without a listener.

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